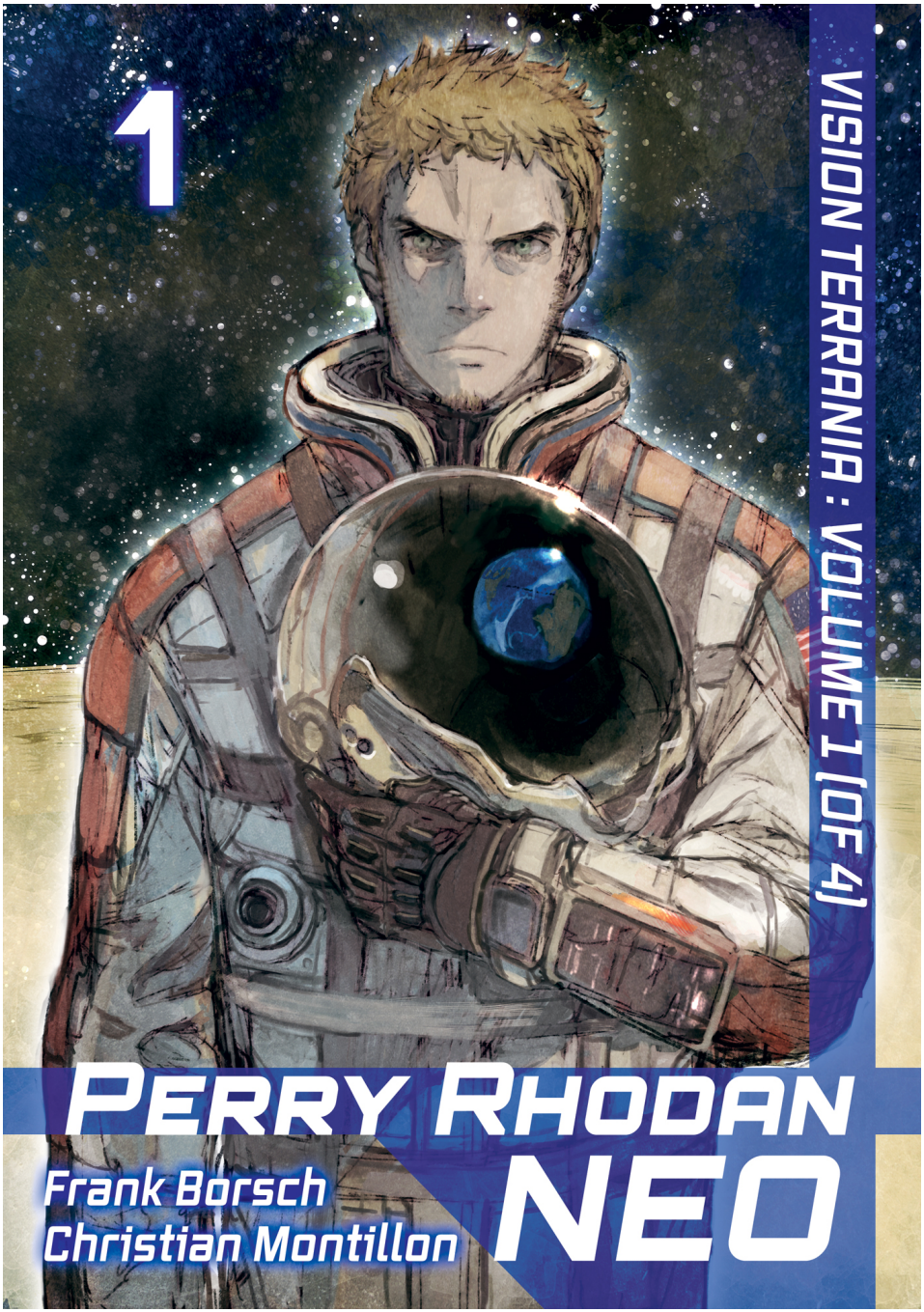

1
VISION TERRANIA : VOLUME 1 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Frank Borsch
Christian Montillon

Table of Contents

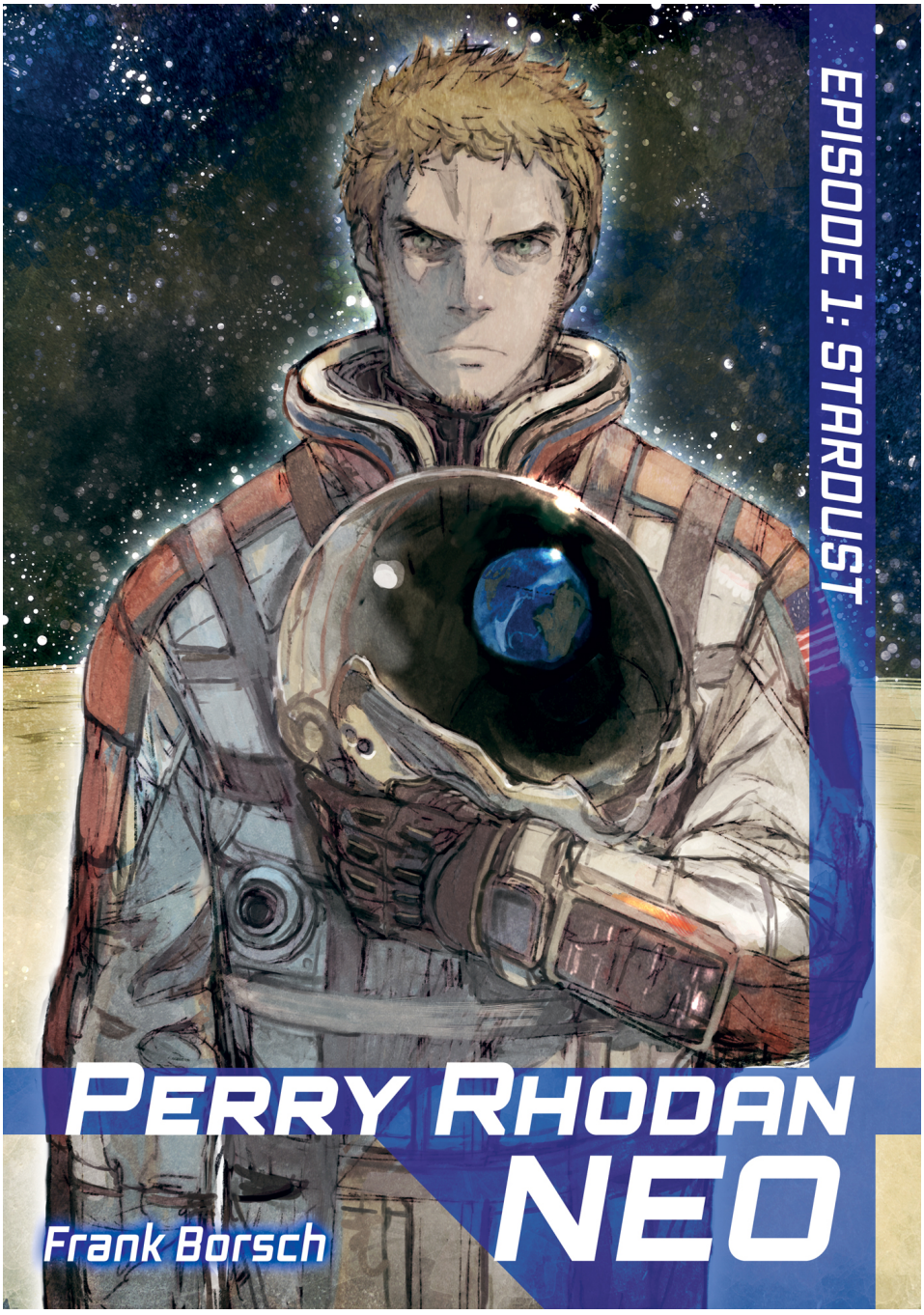
Cover

Episode 1: Stardust

Episode 2: Utopia Terrania

About J-Novel Club

Copyright


EPISODE 1: STARDUST
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Frank Borsch

1.

Smile, damn you! Smile! Those were Pounder's orders.

So Perry Rhodan smiled as he and his crew crossed the endless concrete expanse of the launch complex at Nevada Fields in the early morning of June 19, 2036. He smiled as if the heavy space suit wasn't dragging him down like a lead weight, determined to keep him on Earth by hook or by crook. He smiled as if he wasn't drenched with sweat. He smiled as if all that hung in the balance were the lives of him and his crew. Millions of viewers, across the world and in the stands at the edge of the launch pad, were watching their march. He smiled to ensure that none of them had even a passing thought that there might be far more hiding behind that smile—specifically, that the fate of all mankind was at stake.

Behind them, growing ever more distant, stood the spaceport's control center. In that labyrinth of buildings, hundreds of specialists were feverishly toiling away over the last preparations for the launch. They were assisted by tens of thousands of others spread across North America and the globe who supplemented their work, monitored it, and, if need be, corrected it.

The launch tower rose up before them. It stood so tall that when Rhodan leaned his head back to take in the full scope of the immense structure, his space suit's locking ring dug painfully into his neck. The tower's monumental presence briefly reminded him of the cathedrals of medieval Europe.

Steaming and hissing near the tower, connected to its systems by way of countless cables and conduits, was the rocket that would catapult his crew beyond the Earth's clutches. And, resting at the rocket's tip was their vessel, the *Stardust*. Its stubby wings indicated that the craft was designed for atmospheric flight and therefore a return journey to Earth.

Bull, walking at Rhodan's side, snorted. "If I could get my hands on Pounder! Wants to fire us all the way to the Moon, and he makes us walk the last mile on foot?! What's wrong with that man?"

Sweat poured from the stocky system administrator and

copilot's forehead. It ran down his neck and into his space suit. The suit was designed for a multitude of extreme situations, but none of those included a casual stroll on Earth.

"Pounder has his reasons," said Rhodan. He knew his friend very well; ever since their days as test pilots in the US Air Force, he and Bull had shared a deeper bond than even the best of friends.

Bull's preferred way of handling pressure was to latch on to some trivial detail and refuse to let go no matter what. It worked like a charm. He was by no means a man without fear, but when it came down to it, he sure acted like one—and he had the invaluable advantage of being underestimated by others.

"Pounder *always* has his reasons." Bull stuck to his guns. He would have used both hands to add some emphasis to his words, but the helmet buried under his right arm prevented it. Pounder had insisted on the helmets. "But why do *we* have to be the victims of the old man's scheming?"

"Maybe because we signed up of our own free will?"

Rhodan's interjection only put Bull off his stride for the briefest of moments. "Our own free will?! He twisted our arms! You ask me, Pounder's a—"

Bull's rant was interrupted by the voice of Pounder himself in the crew's earpieces.

"I'm glad to see such a fantastic turnout. To be quite honest, we didn't expect so much interest in our mission. We'll need to squeeze in a little. Could I ask the gentlemen to offer their seats to the ladies, please? Thank you."

The press conference. It had been called for the last few minutes of the countdown—reluctantly, or so it would have seemed to the public. In fact, it had been firmly scheduled by Pounder from the word go. He had at least seen to it that his men could listen in.

"Over the next few minutes, I'll give you a brief overview of the *Stardust*'s mission. I ask you all to please refrain from any interruptions. There'll be plenty of time for questions later."

Rhodan heard a whirring sound that must have been the air conditioner struggling to cope. He could picture the scene: too many journalists crammed into far too small a room—the space having been chosen personally by their fearless leader, of course—and following his directions like good little boys and girls.

Pounder was a decent man whose (many) adversaries unfairly deemed him ruthless and inconsiderate. He stubbornly stayed his

own course, that was all. Resistance was futile. Rhodan knew it, the crew of the *Stardust* knew it, and the assembled journalists knew it.

"I'm going to be honest with you all," Pounder continued. "We have a problem. Com links with Armstrong Base, our research outpost on the near side of the Moon, have been interrupted for the past twenty-seven days. We have therefore decided to take a look and see what's going on up there."

Murmurs. The journalists felt validated. Their instincts hadn't led them astray; something was up. Now the Flight Director of NASA and de facto ambassador of manned space flight was about to personally brief them on the situation.

"To rein in any baseless speculation, I'd like to make it clear that there is no reason for undue panic. Granted, the Moon is an extremely inhospitable environment. There's no atmosphere, and temperatures range from 130 to minus 160 degrees C. The people and equipment are exposed to extreme stress factors. But don't forget, Armstrong Base was designed for such conditions."

He was giving them "the Pounder," as Bull called it. Rhodan didn't know anyone else who could arrange the facts—and they *were* facts; every word he said would stand up to the journalists' scrutiny—with such compelling logic that he could purposefully craft whatever image he wanted. When it came to twisting those facts around his little finger, Pounder was a certified genius.

"That being the case, a breakdown in communications doesn't signify anything too far out of the ordinary. To the team at Armstrong Base, it won't matter all that much. The station is equipped to operate self-sufficiently for up to six months."

A genius you really wanted in your corner. Pounder had brought Rhodan to NASA. And, rather than letting him be swallowed up by the miasma of intrigues and petty jealousies that filled the self-contained world of the space agency, he'd kept Rhodan safe, wielding his protective magic and ultimately appointing him commander of the *Stardust*.

Rhodan had many reasons to be grateful to Pounder, but he'd also learned how to resist being caught by the old man's spell. It was simply a matter of listening closely. With a bit of luck, you could recognize the exact moment Pounder left the realm of objective fact. His statements about conditions on the Moon and the properties of the base were absolutely correct. Only, they were no more than a preamble—a springboard for his leap into the realm of

deception.

"Nevertheless, we've decided to confirm that everything's all right. NASA tradition demands, unconditionally, that we place the highest priority on our astronauts' lives. Despite the severe budget cuts recently imposed on us by Congress, we have an obligation to uphold this tradition."

There it was. The leap. So subtle that none of the journalists would have the slightest suspicion. True, if the situation called for it, NASA wouldn't hesitate to spend a few million to save the life of a single astronaut. However, the *Stardust*'s mission cost many times that sum—and there was far more at stake than the lives of the lunar base's fourteen-strong crew.

"At 0710 hours PST, the *Stardust* will set off on a reconnaissance mission. The ship itself is a prototype of the lunar shuttle, or LS for short, that will make supply runs to Armstrong Base significantly easier and thus pave the way for a permanent colony on the Moon. This flight will also serve as the shuttle's maiden voyage. I can assure you that after years of work on the project, we are as thrilled as you are that this day has finally come."

A moving speech about the *Stardust*, all of it true. Nothing about the expected eruption of Mount St. Helens any moment now, which would have prevented the launch. Nothing about the carrier rocket that would take the *Stardust* into space. The *Stardust* had waited three years for its maiden voyage while prototype after prototype of the new Nova series had given the desert mice of Nevada one fireworks display after another. Without the Nova rockets, NASA would have had no hope of getting the *Stardust* into a lunar orbit.

"To ensure the mission's success, the *Stardust* has been assigned a first-rate crew. I'll give you a brief introduction to each member. Detailed audiovisual material covering the men, the lunar shuttle, and all other relevant topics will be available on your journalist web accounts following this conference."

As the speech continued, Rhodan finally reached the launch tower. Ground crew in protective suits handed them bottles filled with an electrolyte mixture. These guaranteed the astronauts an optimal fluid balance, while at the same time, the sweeteners included gave their empty stomachs the illusion of fullness. Rhodan and his men hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours—a precaution that minimized the risk of choking to death on their own vomit.

The elevator door slid open. He entered the car, and the others followed. The door closed, and the four men found themselves in a stuffy, confined space that foreboded the one in which they'd be spending the following weeks. With a jolt, it started moving.

"The mission's commander and pilot is Major Perry Rhodan. Major Rhodan is thirty-seven years old, unmarried, a graduate of UC Berkeley, and one of our best test pilots. And yes, before you start rudely bombarding me with questions after I explicitly asked you not to, he's the very same Rhodan whose quick response kept an earlier prototype of the LS from crashing in March 2032. Since then, his colleagues have called him the 'instantaneous adapter,' even if this nickname makes him *very* uncomfortable, and I can promise you that it does."

Rhodan could agree with that last statement, at least. The prototype's controls had stopped responding, so he had taken the most obvious step: shutting down the onboard computer and landing the craft manually, even if it was actually only flightworthy due to the hundreds of surgically precise adjustments the computer was usually carrying out every minute. He'd missed the tarmac, but he did get the prototype, himself, and the crew back in one piece.

"Our system administrator and copilot is Captain Reginald Bull. Captain Bull is thirty-six years old, unmarried, and has twenty-four successful space missions under his belt, including a lunar orbit. The *Stardust*'s flight will be a jubilee for him. NASA congratulates him wholeheartedly!"

"Gee, thanks, Pounder!" Bull swept his hand through his red crew cut so vigorously that drops of sweat flew across the elevator car. "To be totally honest, I can think of way better gifts than this suicide mission!"

"Acting as onboard astronomer and payload specialist is Captain Clark G. Flipper. At thirty-two, Captain Flipper is the baby of the crew, but don't let that fool you; he's highly qualified. If you don't mind, I'd like to add a personal note at this point. Most of you will have heard the rumors circulating online. That sort of thing is an awkward but unavoidable side effect of our modern world. With his permission, I can confirm to you now that these rumors are not without substance. Captain Flipper has indeed had to grapple with a terrible stroke of misfortune. I'd like to take a moment to expressly thank him for his decision to take part in the *Stardust*'s mission regardless. We are all in his debt."

Rhodan tried to make eye contact with Flipper but to no avail. The astronaut was staring at the floor. Rhodan wondered what was going on in his crewmate's head. He knew the answer Bull would give: nothing. Flipper was a playboy who showed up with a different lady on his arm every week. What did he care that one of them had gone missing close to the summit of the Annapurna massif, in the death zone above 6,000 meters, a place hardly more hospitable than the Moon's surface? The last communications with Beth's group had been thirty-six hours ago; in all probability, she was now dead.

"Don't worry," Bull had assured Rhodan when he'd shared his thoughts, "Flipper'll get over it. Next week he'll have three new ones." For his friend, that was the matter settled.

Not for Rhodan. True, Beth was one woman in a long list of companions, but she was the one Flipper had kept going back to. His anchor. Now she was as good as dead, and Flipper, the big kid with a dreamy look in his eyes, was staring down at the floor.

"Dr. Eric Manoli will join the *Stardust*'s mission as an onboard doctor and materials researcher. Dr. Manoli is forty-six years old and a veteran of countless orbital missions. For you, his name is likely synonymous with his research in the field of cellular change. We are honored that Dr. Manoli has chosen to take part in this."

Manoli's presence was one of the conditions that Rhodan had imposed. He was a pillar of strength, a man of unshakable calm, and thus exactly what Rhodan needed on the *Stardust* to counterbalance the impulsive Bull and the—under normal circumstances—exuberant Flipper.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I must say I am stunned and flattered by your outpouring of interest. I only wish we could count on a similar level of support from your profession when it comes to our other work. At this very moment, an unmanned probe is entering the practically uncharted ring system of Jupiter—yes, you heard that right, Jupiter! Our scientists are expecting valuable new findings about the formation of the planet, of our entire solar system, in fact. You'll find a selection of the best shots in your data caches. Give it the attention it deserves!"

The elevator stopped and the door slid open to let them pass. Rhodan stepped out and found himself standing nearly two hundred meters above the valley floor of Nevada Fields. The air was dry and cool. A specialist stood by the *Stardust*'s hatch and presented his

open hand to the astronauts. Rhodan took off the probe he was wearing on the left side of his neck, which had been transmitting his medical data to the control center. His crewmates did the same.

"Good luck!" said the specialist.

"Thanks! We're gonna need it!" Bull huffed.

Then the four astronauts crammed themselves into the ship. Rhodan heard Pounder's voice one last time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I see that the *Stardust*'s crew is now on board. In these last few moments before launch, I ask you to join me in adopting a dignified silence."

And to keep any probing questions to yourself! added Rhodan mentally. But this was only a passing thought. The task ahead of him was too big to focus on anything else.

He heaved himself into the formchair and attached the helmet to his space suit. The chair shook; vibrations from the carrier rocket were reverberating through the *Stardust*. Rhodan heard a crackling noise from the earpiece in his left ear.

Bull clambered into the neighboring formchair and donned his own helmet. He turned his head towards Rhodan and said, "By the way, one little thing before this big stick of dynamite blows our butts to smithereens. It was a pleasure to be your friend."

"Shut your damn mouth, you—"

Rhodan's words were lost in the roar of the carrier rocket's propulsion units starting up. The propulsion units belonged to the nearly 150-meter-high Nova, the space agency's last hope for keeping Armstrong Base operating. Owing to the rocket's tendency to violently explode shortly before liftoff, the engineers and technicians had taken to ironically calling it the "Supernova"—until, that was, Lesly Pounder had ordered the launch of the *Stardust*. Since then, no one had dared to joke about it.

Rhodan had initially struggled to believe that Pounder would order something so absurd. However, the Flight Director had invited him to his house and confirmed that, as they spoke, the carrier rocket was indeed being prepped for flight, ready to take the *Stardust* to the Moon.

Flabbergasted, Rhodan had asked what had driven Pounder to this act of madness. His superior had put down the tongs he was using to turn over a steak on his garden grill, reached into his pocket, and presented a photo. It was the last picture the Moon base had transmitted, taken by the camera of an autonomous probe on

the far side of the Earth's satellite. It depicted a crater. A vast crater, nearly three kilometers across. And inside the ring, tall as a mountain, was an immense, round silhouette. Too symmetrical, too even, to be of natural origin.

Not of this world.

The end of the world as mankind knew it.

Rhodan's destination.

The main propulsion units came online and carried the *Stardust* and its crew into the sky and beyond.

2.

"There they are!" Sid exclaimed.

The boy took off running, leaving John Marshall behind. He pushed and shoved his way through the crowds to the wire fence that separated the spectator stands from the Nevada Fields launch complex. When he got there, Sid hooked his fingers into the mesh and pressed his face against the wires.

Marshall followed him and apologized in all directions for the youngster's rude behavior. His stomach was churning. He avoided large crowds as much as he possibly could. They made him nervous. It didn't help that he'd just endured a thirty-nine hour bus ride from Houston to the Nevada desert. It was no small effort, and all for a spectacle that didn't mean a whole lot to John Marshall himself.

In the light of the morning sun, four hazy dots were making their way across a cracked field of concrete that had seen better days. They reminded Marshall of exclamation points; the men were the points and their long shadows were the lines.

"What do you think, John?" Sid asked as Marshall reached his side. "Is it Rhodan and Bull up front?" The boy panted with excitement and exertion.

"Could be. Rhodan's the commander, right?"

"Yeah!" Sid pulled his head back a little and nodded emphatically. It didn't bother the boy that Marshall had asked him something Sid had told him at least a hundred times. "And Bull is the *Stardust*'s copilot. Those two have gotta be best buddies. Don't you think?"

"For sure."

Sid fished his dented pod out of his pocket and aimed it towards the launch pad. It was a model from the late twenties but the child's pride and joy. Sid had single-handedly repaired it in the shelter's workshop, rustling up replacement parts that hadn't been available for years from who-knows-where. He activated the telescope function and zoomed in on the astronauts. The dots grew bigger but more pixelated. Not much to see, as far as Marshall was

concerned.

Sid didn't appear to care. He filmed the dots while murmuring quietly to himself. Marshall had never seen him so excited. Sid González was a quiet boy, an outsider among the band of outsiders that John Marshall had tried to make a home for at the Pain Shelter. A loner who shut out the world and spent most of his time in his room surrounded by space posters and model ships. In short, Sid was John Marshall's problem child.

He'd picked him up off the street, just like all his fosterlings; a scrawny kid who always kept his head lowered because he couldn't bring himself to look other people in the eye, and who lived in constant mortal fear that "*he*" would get him. Never had Marshall managed to coax out any details about who this referred to—who might be after him. Marshall assumed that "he" didn't exist. Sid had been through a lot during his time on the street. He must have collated all his terrible experiences into one imaginary figure.

Three years had passed since Marshall had taken Sid in. The scrawny kid had grown into a chubby teenager with greasy hair and buck teeth. He no longer kept his head lowered. Ever since becoming obsessed with space flight, he'd been craning his head upward towards the stars. However, looking anyone in the eye was still virtually impossible for him.

Marshall's problem child...and his favorite. Why? That was a mystery even to him. Sid had nothing all that charming about him, and yet despite his ironclad policy of treating all his charges equally, Marshall found himself making exceptions for Sid. Exceptions that were sometimes tough to justify. Like, say, leaving the shelter to its own devices for four days, boarding a Greyhound bus, and rattling along three thousand kilometers of crumbling highways cooped up in a space more cramped and stuffy than a space craft's cockpit, all to witness an event that came across to him as, at best, an anachronism from the previous millennium. The hopes and dreams that had once been associated with space flight had long since been extinguished.

"Rhodan and Bull!" cried Sid. "Didn't I tell you?"

On the right-hand side of the stands, a large LED display had come to life. It showed a closeup view of the four astronauts. They wore space suits, with the helmets jammed under their arms. Pearls of sweat beaded their foreheads. The sun had risen barely an hour ago, but this was June in the Nevada desert, so it already shone

with overpowering intensity.

Marshall wondered why the astronauts were being made to suffer like this. Why hadn't they just been driven to the waiting rocket? This march was meaningless. Just as meaningless as the whole flight, or "mission," as it was so loftily called.

Speakers crackled, and a voice echoed tinnily across the stands. Sid recognized it at once.

"Lesly Pounder!" he cried. "The Flight Director of NASA. Using the Nova rocket was his idea!"

Pounder gave a press conference, providing the journalists with the whys and wherefores of the mission. His voice was broadcast from a room that was undoubtedly somewhere in the maze of purpose-built structures that stood on the other side of the complex. Maybe in the pointed needle of the forty-story control tower poking up above the rest?

John Marshall didn't much care for the voice. In his former life, before opening the shelter, he'd been an investment banker. He'd spent his days hunched in front of displays, shuffling money back and forth; columns of numbers that had seemed abstract, but had in fact represented real people's destinies. The rest of his time had been spent in conference rooms listening to people tell him about surefire investments that had mostly turned out to be speculative bubbles.

This Pounder was lying. He was hiding the true nature of the flight; Marshall was sure of it. He'd always had an uncanny knack for detecting lies.

Pounder introduced the *Stardust*'s crew, starting with the commander.

"Perry Rhodan, the instantaneous adapter!" gasped Sid. "Do you know why they call him that?"

After the long journey, of *course* Marshall knew. Still, he played dumb for Sid's benefit. It was good to see the boy come out of his shell.

"No, why?" he asked.

"He saved the lunar shuttle! It was a few years ago. All the systems conked out, and..." Sid waved his arms around, acting out the breathtaking maneuver that Rhodan had pulled off to save the shuttle and his own life. The dented pod played the role of the shuttle. "Rhodan's a hero!" he concluded at last, once the pod had softly touched down on a spectator bench. "No one else could have

saved them!"

A hero?

Marshall looked at the display and took stock of the four astronauts. They smiled. Strained smiles that looked forced. But there was more there. In their faces, Marshall saw resolve and tension, but also a thirst for adventure.

Heroes? Marshall didn't doubt that they had the purest of intentions, and that they were the best of the best in their field. And that was exactly what he *hadn't* wanted to see in them. Why were people of this caliber wasting their time with an obviously meaningless endeavor like space flight? Admittedly, it took a great deal of courage to get on board a ship mounted at the tip of a rocket that was essentially a giant fuel tank threatening to explode at the slightest provocation...which then made good on that threat. Considerably more courage, Marshall frankly admitted, than *he* could ever have mustered.

But what was the point of it all?

"Can you imagine what it'll mean, John, if the rescue mission succeeds?" asked Sid just then, as if he'd read Marshall's mind. "The whole world will marvel at the heroic exploits of the *Stardust*. Congress'll finally give them enough funding for space flight again. NASA can make their plans a reality. In our lifetime, humans can fly to Mars, and beyond!"

The youngster spoke as if he worked for the space agency's marketing department. John didn't respond. Maybe mankind *would* fly to Mars in the not-too-distant future. He doubted it, though. And, even if it *did* happen, the question remained: what for? There was nothing out there but vacuum, cold rock, and, on some planets, deadly gases.

Humanity was not built for space. Earth was their home, and it always would be. And it was their duty to look after their home. They *had* to. Otherwise, mankind wouldn't survive.

Marshall scrutinized the astronauts' faces, focusing on Perry Rhodan in particular. What was going on inside the man's head? He had to have doubts about his mission, right? The *Stardust* was supposed to fly to the Moon and check on Armstrong Base. Com links to the base had been cut off. The fates of eighteen men and women hung in the balance. It was possible they were long dead, and if not, they were sure to be in grave danger. Rescuing them was an undertaking that "demonstrated the good in humanity," as

Pounder's creaky voice had proclaimed.

That was true, maybe. But did it also demonstrate the *intelligence* of humanity? On the bus ride, Sid had shared every tiny detail of the imminent mission. Numbers, measurements, superlatives. Marshall had forgotten pretty much all of it within seconds of hearing about it. All except for one fact: 3.5 billion dollars. That staggering sum was the estimated cost of the *Stardust*'s flight. It came out to just under two hundred million per life saved, and that was in the best case scenario.

How many lives on Earth could have been saved with that amount of money? The shelter that Marshall had set up provided a home for thirty-one children. He'd established a trust with the bonuses from his investment banking days, and that was as far as the dividends stretched. Thirty-one out of the many thousands of orphans fending for themselves on the streets of Greater Houston. Left to manage on their own, they lived short and ugly lives. Marshall firmly believed that helping these children, just giving them the fair chance that every person deserved, could work miracles.

The astronauts reached the launch tower. Steel claws extended from the scaffold at regular intervals to support the rocket on which Rhodan and his crewmates would be riding into space. The rocket was a Nova—Sid had told him all about it. A masterpiece of engineering based on concepts from the sixties in the last century, an era when travel to the other planets of the solar system had seemed no more than a matter of time. There was just the *slight* flaw that the Nova swallowed up NASA's entire budget and, in seven out of ten cases, exploded before reaching space. To Marshall, it looked like a smoking, hissing monstrosity from a bygone age.

The astronauts stepped into the launch tower's elevator. Slowly, it crawled up towards the top.

"John, it's happening! Look, they're getting started! They're about to launch!"

Sid was bouncing with excitement. The sunlight danced across the chrome strips he'd stuck to his jacket to make himself look more like an astronaut. A stopgap measure. Sid had constructed a complete space suit at the shelter and had wanted to bring it with him to Nevada Fields, but Marshall had said no. The whole affair was ridiculous enough without him wearing an entire costume.

The sun sparkled against the chrome strips and...

...next to Sid. As if sparks were flying *directly from him*.

Marshall did a double take. Sid hadn't noticed a thing; all his attention was on the elevator. There weren't any sparks, though, of course. *Totally absurd!* he told himself. *You're imagining things! You're tired and on edge and stuck in the worst possible place: a huge crowd of people!*

"Spark." That was what the other children called Sid. For a long time, Marshall had thought this was their way of mocking him for being fat and slow and awkward, for being different from the others. But one day, Sue had told him the real meaning behind the nickname. Sid gave off sparks, she claimed. Only sometimes, and only for a moment. You had to really get on his nerves, make him angry, and then it happened.

Marshall had dismissed the idea, even if it did come from Sue, who rarely erred in her judgment. Sparks? Every single one of the kids at the shelter was traumatized. Their relationship with the truth was, you might say, somewhat tenuous.

"The launch tower is so far away!" said Sid, slightly peeved for the first time in days. "You can barely see anything!"

"That's what the display is for. It's not big enough for you?"

"Sure, it's big. It's just not...real!"

"It's better that way. The propulsion units cause a burning hot blast. You told me so yourself."

"Not all around, though! And the stands are way farther back than they need to be!"

"I can't do anything to fix that, I'm afraid," Marshall replied. Then he felt slightly annoyed with himself. Why did he always have to feel responsible for everything? Why did he find it so hard to cope when other people were suffering? "The main thing is we're here."

"Yeah, true," the youngster agreed. "That's the main thing." But he said it in a tone that betrayed his disappointment.

Marshall's fingers prickled. It felt as though he'd forgotten to bring gloves along on one of his long winter strolls in Houston, then had returned to the unfamiliar warmth of the shelter. But he was in the Nevada desert in the middle of June. It wasn't cold that made his fingers prickle or that filled him with a deep unease which made it hard to stand still. It was the people.

The stands were—thank God!—only half full. Even so, several thousand people had amassed there. Astrophiles like Sid who saw

the *Stardust*'s launch as a holy event, who brimmed with excitement that rose to a fever pitch in these last few seconds before the end of the countdown. Their exhilaration swept Marshall along with it. It was like the crowd was imposing its will on him, with a force he had no way to combat.

It'll be over soon, he reminded himself as his fingers gripped the mesh of the fence, hooked around the wires so firmly that it cut off the circulation and left him a whisker away from groaning in pain. *In a few minutes, the* Stardust *will have launched. You can try to sleep on the bus ride home, and...*

The crowd, Sid, and Marshall himself hollered as the elevator reached the tower's topmost platform and the astronauts reappeared. One of them, Bull, waved affably at the camera, then they disappeared into the ship.

Marshall was indeed being swept along by the passion of the crowd. But there was something else there, too. A hidden current lurking beneath the boiling sea of emotions. Worry. Fear, certainly. But not because of the flight those men were embarking on at the tip of a dubious rocket, and not about the fate of the Moon base. No, it was something else. Something bigger and more important.

He tried to grab hold of that fear, but the feeling escaped his grasp. It was like looking up at the night sky and trying to focus on a single star, one faint speck of light among thousands. The more you strained to see it, the more deftly it escaped your vision.

The Nova's propulsion units ignited. Red-hot gases shot out of the giant funnels. After a moment's delay, the sound reached the stands and a deafening crash of thunder enveloped the wide valley. The earth shook.

Impossibly slowly, the rocket lifted off, rising up towards the stars inch by inch.

"They're lifting off!" Sid bellowed. "John, they're launching!"

Marshall looked at the boy and saw sparks. Gleaming light surrounded Sid. A torrent of hot air struck his face. "Sid!" he cried. "What's going on? What—"

Marshall stopped short as he realized his cries were directed at thin air. Sid was gone. The spot where he'd been standing seconds before was now empty, as if Marshall had simply imagined his companion.

"Sid! Where—"

The blow that hit Marshall was invisible. The hidden current of

fear revealed itself with the impact of an exploding geyser. The stands, the rocket that was lifting off, Nevada Fields—it all disappeared. All of a sudden, Marshall found himself at the edge of a chasm. Rocks and dust. A sun that blinded him. It made the rocks look as pale as bone. No people, no animals, no bushes, not a single blade of grass. Just dead rock. And, at the bottom of the chasm, a glistening sphere. Too large, too even, too unlike anything else he knew to be of natural origin.

The breath caught in his throat. He bent forward for a closer look, hoping to be able to tell himself that he was suffering from an insane delusion. A delusion that meant nothing.

And then John Marshall fell into the delusion.

3.

The launch went off without a hitch.

All the technicians' cursing in the control center about the firecracker the *Stardust* was riding into space—the Nova, rather, as they weren't allowed to call it a firecracker anymore—did nothing to hide that. The technicians had instead taken to one-upping each other with sarcastic speculations about possible catastrophes. Their voices came through Rhodan's headphones and drowned out the roaring of the propulsion units, which were working at full bore.

It didn't bother him. Their gruff, casual tone told him that everything was A-OK. He clung to those voices, made them his umbilical cord to the Earth as the force of more than six gravos tried to scrape the flesh off his cheeks.

The technicians were good men and women, the leading experts in their fields. They could have worked in the private sphere or for the military and earned many times their modest NASA salaries, but they'd decided not to. The dream of the stars meant too much to them.

Now that the fall of the Moon base meant this dream was on the brink of collapse, they were nervous. They glossed over their apprehension with gallows humor, hiding their worries from each other. The Nova was strange and uncanny to them. It was a mechanical and electronic marvel that provided information about its condition each and every second via hundreds of sensors and probes, and yet somehow seemed to possess its own inscrutable will.

Still, as long as the technicians cracked their jokes, Rhodan and his crew didn't need to worry. At least, he tried to convince himself of that.

There was a jolt. With a *bang*, the burned-out first stage of the Nova split off. The g-force that had been pushing his eyes into their sockets and the air out of his lungs disappeared without warning. He gasped for air, wriggling in his straps like a fish that had been snatched out of the water. He heard his crewmates gasping in the

same way.

"All systems are fully operational," said a voice in his ear, calm and collected. It belonged to Pounder. "You get thirty-three seconds of R&R, boys!"

Bull groaned, but he left it at that. He didn't have enough air in him for the scathing comment that was no doubt on his lips.

Rhodan turned his head to the side and looked at his crewmate. Bull's head was almost as red as his hair, a result of his heart working too hard to supply blood to the underserved parts of his body. Next to his head was a porthole facing the Earth. Rhodan tried to look through it, hoping to catch a glimpse of his homeworld, which by now would be nearly sixty kilometers below them. But he was unsuccessful; his eyes refused to play along, failing to focus.

"Five more seconds until second stage ignition," said Pounder. "Four, three, two, one."

The g-force returned, even stronger than before. A weight seven times that of their bodies bore down on the astronauts, threatening to break every bone and crush their insides. Rhodan wanted to scream, but the pressure reduced his voice to a gurgle, lost without a trace in the raging sound of the second stage's propulsion units.

Rhodan, his head now fixed in the sideways position due to the inescapable g-force, glanced at Bull and confirmed that his own senses weren't lying. It genuinely looked as though invisible fingers were trying to tear the skin from his crewmate's face.

After a while (exactly six minutes according to the *Stardust*'s computer, although to Rhodan it felt like an eternity), the second stage burned out. With a *bang* and a jolt, it was jettisoned, and the surreal lightness of microgravity enveloped the men.

"Hang in there, boys!" said Pounder. "The worst is behind you!"

Was that *sympathy* in the old man's voice? Rhodan must have been hearing things. The g-force had probably damaged the blood vessels in his brain.

But as far as the facts went, Pounder was right. Contrary to all expectations, the *Stardust*'s carrier rocket had faithfully done its job. Only its third, smallest stage was left, which would carry them in the direction of the Moon with moderate acceleration. During that part, Rhodan wouldn't notice a thing.

"Wow, take a look at that!" It was Bull. On paper, he was the one who suffered the worst from the extreme pressure. In practice,

the opposite was true. Rhodan knew why: the doctors' experiments may have been able to precisely measure Bull's physiology, but the man's essential nature, his unwillingness to let anything keep him down, remained hidden from them. With a gloved hand, he pointed at the porthole.

A segment of the Earth loomed through the pane: the South Pacific, bordered to the west by the two green islands of New Zealand and to the south by the ice of Antarctica. Sunlight glistened on the ocean's vast surface.

"Isn't the Earth beautiful?" he asked with disarming emotion. "I could take in this view a thousand times without ever getting—"

A moan that became a gurgle cut him off mid-sentence. Rhodan turned his head; the straps held him tightly, preventing him from following with his whole body while in freefall.

The gurgle had come from Flipper. Dark drops floated inside his helmet, blocking their view of his face and sticking to the inside of the visor.

"Stay calm, Flipper!" It was Manoli. The doctor unfastened his own straps and slid out of his formchair with such purposeful elegance, you'd have thought he'd spent his whole life in space. "Hold your breath for a moment! I'll be right with you."

Within moments, Manoli had reached Flipper. With both hands, he grabbed hold of the helmet's emergency release. The visor slid up, and globules of the dark liquid poured out through the opening, spreading across the cabin. It was blood.

"Nice and calm, now" whispered Manoli. "It'll only take a moment." He retrieved a small pump from a pocket of his space suit. With a *whirr*, it sucked up the drops of blood, revealing Flipper's face. The astronaut was pale, yet at the same time, it appeared to Rhodan, bright red with embarrassment. His gaze wandered, avoiding his crewmates' eyes.

"Open your mouth," Manoli whispered. Flipper followed the order. "Just as I thought...your tongue," the doctor determined. He pulled another item from his pocket. It was reminiscent of a miniature spray can, and in a sense, it was just that. Rhodan heard a soft hissing sound. "Spray plasma," the doctor explained. "By the time we get to the Moon, your tongue'll be good as new, Clark." He gave his crewmate an encouraging clap on the shoulder, then pushed himself away and strapped himself back into his chair.

Clark Flipper took a deep breath and braved eye contact with

Rhodan. “Rookie mistake,” he rasped with tears in his eyes. “A dumb rookie mistake! I’m sorry, Perry. It’ll never happen again. I promise.”

Rhodan waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t sweat it, Clark. It could have happened to any of us.”

“But I…”

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re—”

“What’s going on up there, Rhodan?” Pounder’s voice interrupted. “My medicine men are telling me that you and your boys are worked up beyond reasonable parameters. Your pulses and blood pressures are way over target.”

Rhodan waved his hand again to reassure Flipper, who had collapsed into his formchair with embarrassment, then replied, “Nothing out of the ordinary, Pounder. We’re just excited.”

“And how! Tell me something I *don’t* know. Specifically, what’s going on up there!”

“Nothing. We’re just unusually worked up because we’re on an unusual mission. What’s so weird about that?”

Rhodan heard Pounder inhale sharply in the Nevada Fields control center two hundred kilometers below. Pounder wasn’t used to those under him talking back. He began, “You…” Then he interrupted himself and continued, “You are absolutely right, Rhodan.”

“I appreciate your understanding, sir. We’ll proceed as planned? Deep sleep?”

“Yes indeed!”

“You heard him,” Rhodan said to his crew. “Flipper, Manoli, and I will go into deep sleep. Bull will make sure the *Stardust* doesn’t fly straight past the Moon. I’ll relieve you in due time, all right?”

He didn’t receive an answer.

“Perfect. Let’s go!”

Flipper wiped the tears from his eyes and put his helmet back on. He cast a grateful look at Rhodan before triggering the injection. An instant later, he was under, trapped in a coma-like sleep that he wouldn’t wake from until shortly before they landed on the Moon.

Manoli followed him, then it was Rhodan’s turn.

“Don’t worry, Perry,” Bull reassured him as Rhodan triggered his own injection, “I’ll take good care of our baby.”

In the blink of an eye, Perry Rhodan had plunged into the dreamless night of a deep sleep.

Voices woke him.

They were neither those of the crew nor of Pounder. Nor did they belong to the technicians. And yet, they were familiar to Rhodan.

"...is expected to lead to a further escalation of the conflict," said one voice. It was a woman's. "According to the Iranian foreign office, the Republic of Iran's patience has run out. They claim the latest uprisings of Kurdish and Sunni minority groups are being driven by outside forces; specifically, by Baghdad. They say they can't be expected to tolerate this for much longer..."

"...Taiwan is an inseparable part of the People's Republic of China," said a man's voice. "How much longer must we stand by and watch while the sacred ground of our nation is sullied by usurpers who are little more than puppets of a failed capitalist empire with delusions of grandeur? How much longer must we live in disgrace? How much longer..."

"...the atomic powers of Brazil, India, and Pakistan announced a nuclear non-aggression pact today," stated a third voice. "Effective immediately, the three signatory nations' nuclear forces will answer to a shared high command. The leaders of the Global Pact for Peace and Stability call on other nations to join them. The international financial markets reacted to the news with a short-term rebound..."

Rhodan opened his eyes. He was in the cockpit of the *Stardust*. A sense of gravity was still absent; only the straps kept him from floating out of the formchair. Then he saw where the voices were coming from: the craft's front display was split into half a dozen windows. Each showed a different speaker, commentator, or correspondent.

"Go ahead, Perry!" he heard Bull say next to him. "Call me a terminal news junkie! Guilty as charged. I know I'm a dumbass. All this is happening a hundred thousand kilometers back thataway. And up ahead... God knows I should have other things on my mind."

Rhodan turned his head to look at his friend's face. Bull did not look good. The skin below his eyes was red, as if he'd been crying for a long time and had vigorously rubbed the tears away with his hands. It was no easy task to sit in a vessel as the only one awake,

charging towards the Moon and wondering if there'd be a return journey.

"It's all good," said Rhodan. "We're all human, at the end of the day." He pointed to Manoli and Flipper, who were still in a deep sleep. "Everything okay with those two?" Bull nodded. "And the *Stardust*?"

"Purrs like a kitten during a long journey. A kitten snuggled up on a heating pad. The Nova's third stage was jettisoned three hours ago as planned. What, you didn't feel the jolt?"

Rhodan didn't take the bait of his attempted wisecrack. "Anything else to report?"

"Nope. The technicians keep thinking up more bad jokes. I saved them all. You can have a listen once I'm relieved of duty."

"I will. Sleep tight."

"Thanks!" Bull stretched out and found a comfortable position. The index finger and thumb of his right hand sat on the deep sleep injection trigger, but he didn't activate it right away.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, of course!" he insisted. Then, a few moments later, "No, actually. Nope. Not at all."

"You scared?"

Bull donned a smirk. "I'm a test pilot and an astronaut, remember? I don't know the meaning of the word."

"Worried, then?"

"Let's call it 'legitimate misgivings,' all right?"

"Sure thing. So? What's on your mind?"

"This is." Bull pulled up a new image on the display, dismissing the news channels. It was that photo Pounder had shown him before. The last picture the Moon base had transmitted. It showed the crater, in the center of which (depicted with unnervingly chunky pixels) lay the gigantic round object.

"What about it?" Rhodan asked.

"Let me put it this way, Perry: this whole thing could be a bluff. A trick courtesy of our buddies in China or Great Russia. A balloon with a paper-thin skin. I ran the calculations. In a vacuum, the oxygen tank from a space suit would be enough to blow it up to this size. It's feasible."

"But you don't believe it?"

"Nope." Bull shook his head. "As much as I respect our Chinese and Great Russian friends as astronauts, their senses of humor are

too lousy for this. No, Perry, it's not man-made. You know that. This was constructed by someone else. By aliens."

"To borrow your phrasing, 'let me put it this way': I can't think of any better explanation. And neither can Pounder."

Grim satisfaction flashed in Bull's eyes. "Me neither. Which means it *is* aliens."

"And that leaves a bad taste in your mouth?"

"Better that than the Russians or Chinese or whatever other humans."

"But?"

"But I'm wondering what the hell we're actually doing out here in the *Stardust*."

"We're checking out what's happening on the Moon."

Bull snorted loudly. "That's a load of crap and you know it. An unmanned probe could do a better job of that. Except we don't have any of those left. They've all malfunctioned with no explanation—every last one. Just like our Moon base. The Russians and Chinese haven't heard a peep from their bases lately, either."

"Where are you going with this?" Rhodan asked, although he already knew the answer.

"Simple. Why exactly is Pounder sending us to the Moon? He's one tough cookie, to be sure. I've called him, let's say, *unsavory* things on more than one occasion. But he isn't dumb, nor is he a murderer. If he's sent us out here, it's because he sees an opportunity. Because he knows something we don't. The only question is *what*."

Rhodan didn't answer right away. He had an idea. Not one clear enough to give voice to, but strong enough to give him enough hope to risk his life for this display of lunacy they so generously called a "mission."

He shrugged. "We'll find out soon, old buddy. Now get some rest! I'll never forgive myself if you miss the main event because you're too sleep-deprived."

Bull stared silently at his crewmate. He opened his mouth to say something but ultimately let it go. He knew Rhodan, and he knew he wouldn't be able to squeeze anything else out of him.

Bull triggered the injection. Rhodan looked contemplatively at his friend for a few moments more, then switched off the front display and the cabin lighting.

In the light of the stars, he and his sleeping crew hurtle towards

the Moon.

4.

Lesly Pounder entered his office shortly before dawn, an hour before the *Stardust* would enter the Moon's orbit. NASA's Flight Director didn't know if their mission would succeed. All he knew was that in assigning Rhodan, he'd sent his best man. And that whatever happened, Pounder himself wouldn't get any peace for a long time to come. Maybe never again.

Without turning the light on, he stepped over to the large wraparound window. His office sat at the tip of the Nevada Fields control tower, a forty-story building that mimicked the shape of a rocket. When he'd had it built twenty years ago, they'd almost had his head. Rising sea levels had forced NASA to abandon Kennedy Space Center in Florida. However, instead of outright relocating all of NASA's activities to the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Pounder had compelled the construction of Nevada Fields—a decision that had shown remarkable foresight, as it turned out.

At the time, though, Pounder had been accused of extravagance, of megalomania. He had paid it no mind, ignoring it all just as thoroughly as the vocal criticism he faced for expending ten percent of the already meager budget on projects that lay beyond the realm of conventional ideas.

Lesly Pounder's life's work was to drive mankind's advancement into space. He was too old to fly to the stars himself; his bones couldn't withstand the alternating pressures of intense g-forces and microgravity, which had forced him to make way for others. However, he would do everything in his power to enable *them* to fly, and he was damned if he was going to do that from the stuffy confines of a command bunker like a mole in a burrow, day in and day out. The only reason Pounder was still NASA's Flight Director was that no one else had materialized who wanted to take over leadership of the financially deprived space agency.

In the east, the sky grew lighter. Nevada Fields was situated in one of the many high valleys that ran through the state from north to south. The valley floors were flat and bone dry; it would have

practically been a lunar landscape if not for the Joshua trees that interrupted the barrenness. If you climbed the slopes—as Pounder often did; he had a connection to the Earth despite his yearning for the stars—the Joshua trees gave way to gnarled pines. Eventually, sweating and wheezing, you'd reach a crest that offered a clear view far into the distance. Or you could lean your head back and gaze out into the universe, stars glimmering in the sky with a surreal splendor.

At this very moment, the *Stardust* was up there in the blackness, completing its braking phase for the Moon approach. Pounder wondered what was running through the heads of Rhodan and his crew right now. He could hardly imagine.

"Truly a sensational view," said a voice behind him. "I'm envious of you, Pounder."

The flight director waited a moment before slowly turning. He wasn't shocked. He never was, not since the car with his wife and children inside had skidded off the road a long time ago in Florida. The swamp had swallowed them up, only releasing them two years later. There was nothing that could shock him anymore.

A man sat at his desk, having casually made himself comfortable on the swivel chair. He was small, almost a dwarf, and old, at least as old as Pounder. The hair he had left was little more than a white circlet, but despite that, his face had an inexplicably youthful tautness. It looked natural, with none of the artificial stiffness of a face-lift, as could be seen on many other faces.

"Sit down already, Pounder!" he demanded, pointing patronizingly to the guest chair. The man was acting as though it were *his* office, as though Lesly Pounder were the trespasser rather than he.

"I should call the military police and have them throw you straight out the window, Mercant," said Pounder. "Maybe that would wipe the smile off your face."

"It would be an interesting experiment," Mercant replied. "You're assuming, of course, that the military police would follow your orders." He gestured towards the telephone sitting on the edge of the desk. "Want to try your luck?"

Pounder deliberated. Allan Mercant was a puzzle to him. For almost a year now, he'd been snooping around Nevada Fields. He flashed his ID card under the noses of those who wanted to see it as well as those who didn't. "Homeland Security." It was enough to

command, if not fear, then at least respect from whoever he was staring down.

Apart from that, Mercant did...nothing. He was just *there*, showing up in the most unlikely corners of Nevada Fields and typically presenting himself as a lovable old man with unlimited time and an impressive capacity for chitchat.

What was his purpose here? Pounder could only speculate. Mercant had to be a watchdog. Or was he there as a distraction, using his conspicuous behavior to draw all the attention while the real Homeland Security agents carried out their work unnoticed and undisturbed? Pounder had even wondered more than once if he'd been duped by a fraud, by a crackpot who was putting on an act and had taken everyone for fools with insinuations and a perfectly forged Homeland Security ID.

But that couldn't be; his attempts to find out more about Mercant had all failed. As far as the net was concerned, the man didn't exist. And that could only mean one thing: Mercant really did work for the most powerful bureau in the United States.

Now, shortly before the *Stardust* reached the Moon as part of a mission that would potentially decide the fate of humanity, this man had made himself at home in Pounder's office. He drew a deep breath, then went over to the door and closed it. Pounder was a proud man. However, there was one characteristic essential to his nature that was even stronger than his pride: curiosity.

He sat down in the guest chair. "What do you want, Mercant?"

"To talk to you."

"Why?"

"Because I'm worried about the current situation."

Pounder couldn't help laughing out loud. "Leave that to me. Those are my men up there."

Mercant fell silent for a moment. He looked at the flight director with an earnestness that didn't match his jovial face. Then he said, "And mine too."

"Who do you think you are?" Pounder asked, leaning forward. "Just because Homeland Security thinks rules and regulations don't apply to—"

"I'm not speaking in the name of Homeland Security or on their orders," Mercant interrupted. "I've come to you as a human being. In the *Stardust*, humans are flying into the unknown."

Pounder wavered. Mercant sounded sincere. "You don't need to

worry. Rhodan is my best man. The crew of the *Stardust* is as safe as humanly possible."

"In that regard, I wouldn't jump to any conclusions if I were you." He winked. "But more on that later. My worries concern not only the four people in the *Stardust* but humanity as a whole." He bent forward. "Pounder, we stand at the precipice."

The flight director examined the man across from him. What did Mercant want from him? Had he gone insane? Or had he always been crazy, the aura of mystery he'd shrouded himself in simply a deception?

"You're wasting your effort, Mercant. From its inception, humanity has lived on the edge of the precipice. And, as you can see, we're still living there now."

"Yes. But I'm afraid that right now we're *so* close to the edge that one little nudge may send us plummeting down irreversibly. The tiniest catalyst will be enough."

Pounder understood. At least, he thought he did. "Are you alluding to the *Stardust*'s mission? I can assure you that—"

The unwelcome visitor shook his head. "Not the *Stardust*. I'm talking about here. Earth." He rapped the desk with his knuckle. "Pounder, I know you can't stand me. And for good reason. No one likes a Secret Service agent. You can never trust them. But I beg you, try to see things differently for a second. Look at me; I'm a veteran like you. I've worked in my field for decades. I've participated in a great many things, and I've done a great many things of my own. Some of those I should have avoided, and for some I'll have to burn in hell one day, if there is a hell. But anything I did, I learned a lot from it, and I got to know many faces. You talk to people. You form bonds of trust that sometimes develop into friendships and sometimes remain mere alliances of convenience. A web is weaved that's intangible yet quite real. You discover things that are never written down nor saved anywhere."

"Where are you going with this?" Mercant's words didn't sit right with him, not least because he sensed how true they were. He and the agent were more alike than he wanted to admit.

"The People's Republic of Iran, allied with Great Russia, is on the brink of declaring a new offensive against Iraq."

Pounder furrowed his brow. "That's all you have to share with me? How many is that now? Fifteen? Twenty? Who cares anymore?"

“It’s number twenty-three,” Mercant replied. “But it’ll be the last. Iran is planning to deploy *tactical* nukes. I happen to know the Iraqi generals’ plans. They’re organizing a counterattack: the obliteration of Tehran with *strategic* nukes.” When Pounder didn’t answer, Mercant continued. “Do you know what that means? Crossing a threshold from which there’s no way back. The proxy war will turn into a hot war between Great Russia and the United States. Both sides have tens of thousands of nuclear warheads at their disposal.”

Mercant’s voice had a tone of forced nonchalance that convinced Pounder the Secret Service agent was telling the truth. But why was he telling *him*—the civilian, the dreamer looking up at the stars? And why at this particular moment?

“That’s not all,” Mercant went on. “My contacts in the Chinese secret service report that in the event of a nuclear conflict between the US and Great Russia, their government is planning to recapture Taiwan for the Chinese motherland. The United States will be too busy to defend Taiwan. Only, the invasion won’t succeed. Taiwan has secretly been developing nuclear capabilities of its own. If the People’s Republic strikes, it will inevitably lead to another nuclear war.”

“Disconcerting information indeed...if it’s accurate,” said Pounder carefully. “But why are you sharing it with me, of all people? I’m just the leader of a rundown civilian space agency that’s been choked half to death by budget cuts. We try to stay out of earthbound conflicts as much as possible.”

“Exactly. And I’m an old secret agent whose leaders grew suspicious of him and shoved him into a post with roughly the same importance as the US ambassador to San Marino because it was easier that way. No one expects anything earth-shattering from either of us; and that’s exactly why we’re capable of changing the world. If we stick together.”

“I don’t understand what you’re—”

“The *Stardust* is flying to the Moon to make contact with alien life. Did you honestly think you could hide that from me?” Mercant smiled. “I know all about it. Homeland Security knows. You have nothing to fear from me. The bureau, however, is a different matter. The men and women there, in the government, are small-minded. Their field of vision is narrowly focused on the Earth and its conflicts, and they’re obtuse enough to believe that these are an

inalterable part of human nature. These people have a fear of the unknown. They can't think in any terms other than categories of threats and invasions. Everything boils down to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. One populace versus another. They're ready to act in the way their fears dictate. *Any* means is acceptable to them."

"There may well be people like that," Pounder conceded. He'd had plenty of experience with narrow-mindedness in his long career. "But you're jumping to conclusions, Mercant. If what you're suggesting is true, why did the President order the *Stardust*'s flight?"

"For exactly that reason. This isn't supposed to be a peaceful first contact. These people can't even imagine that as a possibility. No, the *Stardust* is carrying a bomb intended to wipe out the aliens."

"That...that's..." Pounder couldn't finish the sentence. He glanced at the man, trying desperately to read his countenance. To find any sign that the Secret Service agent was lying...that this entire meeting was a mean-spirited prank.

He found no such indication.

"The *Stardust*'s ground vehicle has been primed," said Mercant. "Homeland Security installed it with a nuclear explosive. It can be triggered by a com signal. If no com signal reaches the bomb, it will be detonated by a timer fuse."

Pounder wanted to counter this assertion, but words failed him. He thought back on the last few weeks and the sudden eagerness with which he'd been received in Washington. The government had granted him practically unlimited funds to get the *Stardust* off the ground. Government secretaries and officials who had ignored him for years had found time for him, buttered him up, and...

Mercant was telling the truth. The bomb was real.

"What can we do?" asked Pounder.

"You have to warn your team. Without raising suspicion from anyone on the outside. You're a wily old fox, so don't tell me you can't. I bet you've set up a secret code with Rhodan. Warn him!"

Pounder looked at the clock. Very soon, the *Stardust* would enter the orbit that they would be following to the far side of the Moon. While in the Moon's shadow, no further communication would be possible. He had to be quick.

He hurried to the door. When his hand was on the knob, he turned back to Mercant. "All right," he agreed, "I'll warn Rhodan. But what about you? What will you do?"

"Oh, I'm done." The agent smiled fleetingly, as if they were

finishing up a trivial conversation at a barbecue. “Maybe I’ll have one or two conversations with old friends…”

5.

One light-second.

After three days' flight, a single light-second separated them from the Earth; a distance of almost three hundred thousand kilometers. The short delays in communication, no longer than a heartbeat, were a constant reminder that a yawning chasm of emptiness separated the men on the *Stardust* from their home.

Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, Eric Manoli, and Clark Flipper. They had all come out of their deep sleeps now. Wide awake, they watched as they drew closer to the Moon.

They didn't feel any fear. The sleep had offered them a sense of well-rested composure that they'd retain for another two or three hours. It was a feeling of limitless strength, as if they could take on the whole universe. It was also their armor, the only protection the four men had as they zoomed through space in their tiny metal cubicle. In reality, they were incredibly vulnerable. Anything could mean their end—one little defect, an unseen bug in the programming, a collision with a particle of cosmic debris, or a single wrong decision.

Rhodan turned his attention away from the status display, which showed all systems green as it had done since their journey began, and looked at his team. Flipper had regained some of his former unshakable confidence. Some good news had been waiting for him when he woke up: a signal had been received from an SOS beacon belonging to Beth's group, and they were currently ascertaining its position. A rescue team would be heading out. They might still reach her in time. Maybe. Flipper held onto that hope.

Manoli reclined in his formchair, as collected as ever. His breathing was even; he didn't stir. Rhodan wondered if he'd ever see Manoli lose his cool. He couldn't imagine it, and, thinking about it, he didn't want to.

Bull had pulled down the visor on his helmet, and Rhodan observed the images that flickered across the integrated display. Viewed from the outside, they were inverted. Bull was watching

three news channels at once—Rhodan believed he could see tanks, rockets raised up threateningly on their mobile launch platforms, and men delivering angry speeches—but the majority of the display was taken up by a simulation game. He watched as his friend built an empire in no time flat that encompassed large parts of the Milky Way. Its central world was Earth, which Bull was calling "Terra." His friend, who was not a great believer in useless brooding, was distracting himself.

And how was Rhodan doing? He took stock of himself. He felt strangely confident. It was like he stood at the edge of a cliff there was no way back from. If he wanted to live, he had to jump, to cast off his old life. Without even being able to guess how his new life would look...assuming he had one at all.

"T minus fifty-nine minutes," the control center transmitted. It was a mundane, emotionless announcement that could have come from a machine. It hadn't, however. A moment later—no, two moments; the light-second that separated them from Earth saw to that—the same voice said animatedly, "Give it up, Reg! You're no match for me anyway. By the time you've put a fleet together, I'll have conquered half the galaxy!"

Bull lifted up his visor and smirked. "Big surprise there, Raimond. You're a whole damn second ahead!"

Of course. Raimond, that was the technician's name. Rhodan had forgotten; there were literally hundreds in his mold at Nevada Fields. Far too many to memorize all their names, at least for him. All that stuck with him were the most important ones. Bernhardt, an American of German descent with a fiery temper that made Pounder look like everyone's best buddy, had worked on the space program with a degree of devotion that put Pounder's to shame. Unfortunately, he had died in a tragic accident. Rhodan had no doubt whatsoever that if not for Bernhardt's tireless efforts, none of them would ever have left the Earth.

Bull, on the other hand, knew every name down there. Not just the technicians, either; he knew them all, down to the last substitute janitor. And with each one of those people, he seemed to effortlessly know the right tone to take.

"So do you, Reg!" argued the technician. "That light-second's delay counts both ways. Man, you'd better watch out. If Pounder realizes what a shoddy grasp of physics you have, he'll get a shuttle ready and come chasing after you to drag you back!"

“He can be my guest! At least I’d be out of this hunk of junk.”

“Sure! And the second you’re out—” Raimond stopped mid-sentence. A few long seconds elapsed, then he said impassively, “Braking phase begins in thirty seconds. Team in position!”

More than three hundred thousand kilometers separated Rhodan from Nevada Fields, but he could picture what had happened. Pounder had entered the control center, and the hundreds of technicians, who had moments before been carrying out their tasks with their feet up on their desks, were now sitting ramrod straight in front of their displays. The old dog had no time for fun and games. Work was work. It was deadly serious.

“Ten seconds until braking phase. Five, four, three, two, one, zero!”

With a violent judder, the *Stardust*’s propulsion units came online. The g-force pressed the astronauts into their formchairs with nine times their own weight. Rhodan closed his eyes and concentrated on the multicolored haze that danced on his retinas to distract himself from the pain. It wasn’t entirely successful. Three days’ flight in microgravity had been enough for his body to grow accustomed to the new normal.

Rhodan pictured how the *Stardust* would advance to the Moon, their vessel a flaming star that would be fully visible to onlookers even with the naked eye. Their speed would steadily decrease, ultimately sinking to three and a half kilometers per second, a value that would let the Moon’s gravitational field capture their tiny spacecraft and pull it into orbit.

The *Stardust* would then make one circuit around their destination in order to cut down its speed without exposing the crew to excessive strain. For reconnaissance purposes, of course. The craft had to probe the terrain before landing, particularly the far side of the Moon. Since the breakdown of all lunar satellites, it had once more become as mysterious as it had been for most of human history.

After a successful orbit, the ship would begin its final descent and touch down at Armstrong Base.

The braking phase came to an end. Rhodan and the other men groaned with relief and basked in the refreshing weightlessness. Ten seconds later, their navigational jets kicked in and tilted them to a very specific angle. Through the window of the cockpit, close enough to reach out and touch, hung the Moon.

This maneuver was a waste of valuable fuel; doubly so because the *Stardust* would have to swivel around again before the final descent. However, Bull had demanded it.

"You stick our little *Stardust* on a...a temperamental diva of a rocket, shoot us to the Moon, then don't even treat us to a good view?" his friend had protested at the first meeting.

Pounder could normally be relied on to meet an attack with a counterattack as consistently as the sun could be counted on to rise every morning. In this case, though, he had eyed Bull with what Rhodan perceived as a look of respect. Then he'd proceeded with the meeting as if there had been no interruption. However, when Rhodan had held the printout of the flight plan in his hands the next day, Bull's maneuver was on the list.

The Moon grew larger and larger. Soon it took up the entire window. Bull switched off the cabin lighting, and the displays dimmed automatically. Pale moonlight flooded the cabin.

Pounder opened a line. A cough, then, "Everything all right, gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir." As the commander, Rhodan took charge of answering.

"All flight and diagnostic values are within permissible ranges," said Pounder, as if he hadn't heard the response.

"Glad to hear it."

"I have an update for Clark Flipper. The rescue teams have received another distress call from the Annapurna massif. It's in Morse code and too irregular to come from an automatic transmitter. At least one member of the group that includes Mr. Flipper's..." Pounder hesitated, searching for the right phrase. "Mr. Flipper's special someone must still be alive."

"Thank you!" Flipper called out. "That's great news." Clark spoke stiffly, but the tears welling in his eyes didn't escape Rhodan's notice.

"I thought so too," said Pounder. And then, after a pause measuring more than a second, he continued. "By the way, Rhodan, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. You've lost our bet. Mount St. Helens hasn't erupted after all." The flight director cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I see that in fourteen seconds you'll enter the shadow of the Moon. We'll speak again when you've reached the other side. Pounder out."

He had barely finished speaking before Bull's head whipped

around. “A bet, Perry? I didn’t know Pounder was into that kind of thing.”

Rhodan looked at the instruments. “Later, okay? Any moment now...”

Darkness abruptly encompassed the spacecraft as it entered the Moon’s shadow. Now the Moon not only shielded them from the sun’s light but absorbed their own com waves and those from Earth as well. At the lower edge of the cockpit was a ticker that ran a continual stream of diagnostic values from ground control. This now froze, then displayed a warning: “Connection interrupted!”

The men on the *Stardust* held their breaths. They waited for something—anything—to happen. They looked deep inside and tried to tell themselves that the loneliness didn’t bother them, that the umbilical cord of communication tying them to the Earth had only given them an *illusion* of safety. It didn’t matter that it was gone now.

The seconds crawled by.

Nothing happened.

Bull took a deep breath. “Dammit, Perry! Don’t play dumb with me! You? A bet? You *never* place bets. And Pounder, that crusty old fossil, wouldn’t know what a bet was if it bit him on the ass. Spill it already! What the hell’s—”

With an impact that forced the air out of his crewmate’s lungs, the *Stardust*’s propulsion units unexpectedly deployed and swung the craft around. Bull shouted in anger; the propulsion units had started up in breach of the flight plan. His roar was interrupted and reduced to a gurgle as his lungs fought against the sudden grueling pressure. He lay askew in his form chair, his left arm fixed at an unnatural angle.

Rhodan ignored this. He called up the craft’s data on the propulsion units. Through the dancing specters in his vision, he managed to read it. The *Stardust* was braking at full thrust.

Rhodan heaved his right arm around and slammed it against a sensor on the inside of the armrest. A beep confirmed that he’d made contact. A joystick slid out of the armrest, and Rhodan forced his hand up, closed his gloved thumb and index finger around the stick, and locked them in place.

“Malfunction in the onboard computer,” he stated. “Reinitialize!” He squeezed the joystick, and the displays turned black. The *Stardust*’s propulsion units promptly cut out, and

merciful weightlessness returned.

Merciful but treacherous. The *Stardust* was now falling towards the Moon. Its speed was too low to maintain orbit.

Bull moaned with pain. Out of the corner of his eye, Rhodan could see Manoli getting out of his chair and pushing himself over to his friend.

“Dislocated shoulder,” he pronounced.

Without another word, his legs shot forward and rammed into Bull’s shoulder as he held onto the formchair’s armrest. Bull bellowed in pain.

“Back where it belongs,” the doctor declared impassively. He pulled a disposable syringe from his pocket. “This’ll get rid of the pain, Reginald. To a certain extent, at least.”

Manoli injected the painkiller and Bull’s groaning subsided. The doctor nodded to him again, then swiftly returned to his own chair and strapped himself in.

The cockpit displays remained dark.

“Initialization failed,” said Rhodan. “Initialize backup computer one.”

There was no change.

“Initialization failed. Initialize backup computer two.”

Blackness remained on the displays.

“Initialization failed. Initialize backup computer three.”

Nothing.

“Initialization failed. Initialize backup computer four.”

Still no response.

“Initialization failed. Assuming manual control,” Rhodan concluded.

“How’s that supposed to work?” Manoli called out. “We don’t have any readings!”

“Height is 360 kilometers, rate of descent is 1.8 kilometers per second,” declared a voice that resonated with suppressed pain. It belonged to Bull.

“Where the hell did you get that from?”

“From here.” He raised his left arm. On his wrist he wore an antiquated mechanical watch. “I memorized the time the propulsion units decided to kick in.”

“You memorized the time?” asked the doctor, astounded. “While the g-force was dislocating your shoulder?”

“Yup. I just happened to glance at my watch,” he replied in a

tone that left even Rhodan puzzled as to whether the remark had been meant seriously.

"You...just happened to..." Baffled, Manoli looked at Bull. "And that gives you our height and rate of descent?"

"Nope. I memorized the height. We were 610 kilometers above the Moon's surface. Based on the time that's passed since then, our starting height, and my knowledge of our propulsion units' thrust, I can calculate everything else up here." He tapped his helmet.

Manoli fell silent. He had no answer to that.

The Moon was so large now that they could only see a small portion of the surface. Craters, mountains, and pale, bare rocks awaited them.

"Commencing braking maneuver!" Rhodan proclaimed. He ignited the propulsion units and the g-force returned. It was soft, amounting to maybe twice that of Earth's gravity.

For a few seconds, silence prevailed in the cockpit, leaving the men alone with their thoughts. Then Flipper cried, "No, Perry!"

"What's wrong, Clark?"

"I've roughly calculated the fuel consumption based on the data that Reginald provided."

"What about it? Are we not going to make a landing?"

"A landing, sure. But we won't have enough fuel left to fly back to Earth!"

Rhodan nodded slowly. Flipper was the payload specialist. He could rattle off the weight of every component and piece of cargo on the *Stardust* down to the last gram. "What do you propose?"

"We let ourselves fall without braking. Just before impact, you give it full throttle. Then the propulsion units will work more efficiently, and we'll have enough fuel left after landing for a return journey."

"Your thoughts, Reginald?"

"Clark, I'm honored by your trust in me," Bull growled, "but my estimates aren't precise enough for that. If I'm a tenth of a percent off, we'll crash into the surface and end up flatter than roadkill."

Rhodan looked through the glass. The Moon was so close now that he reckoned he could pick out individual rocks protruding from the fields of dust. "We'll stick to a safe descent," he decided. "We can agonize over the rest once we land."

A scant two minutes later, riding on flaming rear propulsion units, the *Stardust* touched down on the Moon with such

smoothness that it would have drawn a reluctant compliment even from Pounder.

But as of now, the chances that Pounder would ever lay eyes on the *Stardust* again stood at precisely zero.

6.

"John! They're going to kill each other!"

Sue burst through the door to John Marshall's room without knocking, breaking one of the Pain Shelter's most important rules. Sue, who treated the rules as gospel.

John turned around in his chair, the joints squeaking loudly. "*Who's* going to kill *who*?"

"Damon and Tyler!" she cried. She was wheezing. The girl was frail and nimble at the same time. The slightest exertion sent her pulse through the roof.

"Why?"

"No idea! They're not saying a word. Come quick, John, please!"

She ran out.

John stood, albeit reluctantly. It was a struggle to tear himself away from the screen. Since returning from Nevada Fields that night, he'd been surfing the web nonstop, desperately searching for any sign of Sid. That was all he had left. Sid's pod was offline.

The boy had disappeared with no explanation. He was gone when Marshall regained consciousness in the Nevada Fields sickbay, plagued by visions of bone-pale rocks and an enormous steel sphere. A vision that was a mystery and unsettled him. What he'd seen in his mind's eye was important. Supremely important. Marshall felt it. Only, he didn't have the slightest clue as to *why*.

He pushed aside his thoughts of the vision. The most pressing matter was Sid. What had happened to him?

Marshall had set himself a deadline. He had until midnight, then he'd inform the police, even though Sid would see him as a traitor. Sid was afraid of the law, like virtually all the kids at the shelter were.

"John! What's taking so long?" Sue stood in the doorway again.

Marshall pulled himself together and ran down the wide, creaking staircase as fast as he could. Sue ran in front. She was more nimble than he was and quickly outpaced him.

It didn't matter. The cheers and shouts from the dining room on the first floor were enough to lead the way. The kids had shoved the tables and benches to the side to make a space in the middle. They stood tightly packed together, forming a circle. Not a single child was missing, Marshall confirmed with a well-practiced glance. They'd come out of their rooms, out of the workshop, out of the kitchen, out of the garden behind the building.

"What's going on here?" he shouted. Marshall never raised his voice, let alone yelled...for good reason. He saved the big guns for cases like this when everything was at stake.

The circle of children had a gap wide enough to allow him and Sue through, the girl remaining a step behind him at an angle. She was too familiar with her own fragility to take any unnecessary risks. She had pulled her arm stump out of the sleeve of her T-shirt and was pressing it tightly against her body underneath, as if it were an indescribably precious and fragile possession.

Two young black men stood in the middle of the circle. They were muscular and a head taller than even Marshall, who was considered tall himself. The pair circled one another, legs apart, limber and ready to pounce. They stalked each other, seeking the right moment to strike. Each held a knife in his hand. They looked like mirror images.

Damon and Tyler. The twins. They had just turned fifteen; children in the bodies of grown men.

The brothers didn't pay Marshall any mind. They were fully focused on each other, and they knew they were stronger than him. He couldn't stop them from killing each other.

Sue had been pestering Marshall for a long time to throw them out of the shelter. She was a girl in the body of a small child, fifteen years old and forced to mature long before her time in her years on the street, and she was afraid of the twins. They never followed any of the rules and were always on the verge of lashing out. They brought unrest to the shelter. Ticking time bombs, Sue had warned him.

Damon and Tyler had a hiding spot. Sue didn't know what it was for. The twins were squirreling something away—probably drugs. Marshall had kept the boys in the shelter regardless. In the outside world, they'd have been dead within half a year. The gangs in Sugar Land kept an eye out for youths like them—ideal recruits. In two weeks they'd have been made into dealers, and in three

months, killers. After that, it was only a matter of time before some other killer was quicker than them.

Marshall didn't want to have their deaths on his conscience. He believed there was good in the twins. Buried deep down, sure, but it was there. He just needed to give them the chance to discover it.

"I asked you what's going on here!" he repeated.

No answer.

Sue tugged at his shirt, and Marshall followed her gaze. Tyler's neck was bare. His good luck charm was missing.

"Where's your amulet, Tyler?" he asked.

This time the boy reacted. "He stole it!" He glared at his brother through eyes burning with rage, and pointed at him with the blade of the knife.

The amulet was Tyler's most precious possession. It was the figure of Saint Christopher, who had carried the Christ Child across the river; a cheap plastic trinket with the color flaking off. Tyler had found it in a trash can long before he'd wound up at the shelter. The boy believed that the saint was by his side, guiding and protecting him.

It was a senseless attachment in the eyes of Marshall, who believed in neither saints nor gods. But the practice was a prevalent one. Each of the kids had something—an amulet, a ring, a rabbit's foot, an old coin—that they clung to for dear life.

"He's lying!" Damon screamed. "I don't have his damn saint!"

"You've got him! He's gone!"

"Why do you think your brother stole the amulet?" Marshall interjected. The twins had broken their silence; now he had to keep them talking. "Tyler, couldn't you have just dropped it somewhere?"

"I never take it off!"

"And now it's gone missing, so you're worried," Marshall inferred. "I understand that. But what makes you think your brother, of all people, stole it?"

"Because he's jealous of my amulet! He always has been!"

"No, I'm not!" screamed Damon.

If John Marshall had closed his eyes, he'd have believed he had two school kids in front of him arguing over a lost trading card. But this was no mere trifle.

Marshall focused, listening to his inner voice. He sensed the pain of the two boys, who had never been loved in their entire

lives. He sensed their unshakable rage that continually drove them to hurt others. It was almost overpowering. It brought tears to his eyes. And one thing was certain: if he didn't find a solution, and quick, this would end in a murder.

"Give it back, Damon!"

"I don't have your damn amulet!"

"Liar!"

Tyler shot forward. His right arm darted out. Damon tried to dodge but didn't manage it in time. The blade struck his upper arm and pierced his skin.

It was as if the blade had struck Marshall too. He groaned, and his right hand reached to his upper arm, which was burning with pain. He grasped at a wound that wasn't there. Anger rose up inside of him. Tyler's anger over losing his good luck charm, Damon's anger towards his brother, who had falsely accused him and wounded him...and finally, there was Marshall's own anger. He only wanted what was best for the kids, and now he was driven to despair over them and his own efforts.

His awareness grew hazy. The children's hollering turned to background noise, not unlike the drone of traffic on the Southwest Freeway, which ran south of the shelter. Sue's anxious cry came from farther in the distance, as if it were an echo. The world suddenly spun around Marshall, faster and faster, and...

...and suddenly it stopped. Marshall found himself somewhere else once more. A large room, a dozen workbenches, the scent of oil. The shelter's workshop.

Marshall *was* Tyler. The other Tyler. The boy who lost himself in his work. For hours at a time he'd be engrossed in repairing the abandoned bicycles that a truck from city hall brought to the shelter once a week.

He, Tyler, leaned down over a wheel rim. A targeted kick had bent it out of shape. He, Tyler, felt the pain captured in the aluminum. Cautiously, he eased the wheel away from the fork. It was stuck. He bent forward, gripped the ends of the axle with both hands, and pulled. They wouldn't budge. He pulled a second time, more forcefully. He didn't notice when the leather cord his amulet hung from got caught on the hook that served to pull the bicycle frames up to the desired height. He didn't notice that the same yank that detached the wheel from the fork also tore the leather cord; that the amulet had fallen and slid between the rusty scrap parts piled up next to him...

Marshall wrenched his eyes open and returned to the dining hall. “Tyler!” Something in his voice made the twins pay attention. “Tyler, hold on a moment! Okay?”

The boy didn’t say anything. But he stayed still. He didn’t try to subdue his bleeding brother.

Marshall spun around and got onto his knees to put himself at Sue’s eye level. “Go into the workshop!” he whispered. “The scrap parts in Tyler’s area. His amulet is under those!”

“How... How do you know that?”

“I just do. Now go! Run!”

Sue ran off. Long minutes passed. The kids were silent. Some of them openly stared at Marshall or the brothers. Others let their gazes wander restlessly, as if they couldn’t decide where the real action was.

Damon and Tyler watched each other furtively. Damon tried to act as though he wasn’t bothered by the wound, which was sending large, heavy drops of blood falling to the floor that split into countless droplets as they landed. Tyler tried to act as though he didn’t care about what Marshall had just said. And Marshall acted as though he was sure of himself. As if he wasn’t wondering if his desperation had made him lose his mind and imagine things that were impossible.

At last, Sue returned. “I have it! I have it!” her voice came from the hallway. Sue had had to cross through the whole building to get to the workshop and back. She burst into the room, panting, her good arm stretched out into the air. In her hand was the amulet.

“I have it, Tyler! Your amulet! It was in the workshop! You must have lost it there without realizing.”

She ran over to the boy, who was twice as tall and heavy as her, and held it out to him. She fully extended her thin good arm, ready to flee as per her apprehensive nature.

Tyler carefully took the amulet from her opened hand, as if handling a priceless artifact. Then, when it dawned on him that the whole shelter was staring at him, was glimpsing his innermost self, he hurriedly put Saint Christopher into his pocket and folded away the blade of the knife. He murmured something that no one could make out and strode through the gap that opened up for him in the circle.

His brother folded his knife away too and left, heading in the opposite direction.

“Done!” Sue bounded joyfully over to Marshall. “How on earth did you—”

“What took you so long?” he interrupted. “Was the amulet not where I told you?”

“It was, but...” Her eyes widened in fright as it came back to her. “...but I had to answer the door. No one else heard the bell.”

“So? This was more important.”

“Yeah...” she said, nodding eagerly, but then shook her head. “No...not at all!”

“Why not?”

“There’s a man in a suit at the door. He showed me a weird ID. He wants to talk to you, John!”

“John Marshall?”

The man was young and slim. Under thirty, John guessed. His suit, tailored in an old-fashioned style, didn’t fit him all that well. Marshall was reminded of the sales reps who somehow made their way to the shelter a few times each year, misguided enough to think they could sell him something. But this man was too sure of himself to be a salesman.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Good.” The stranger nodded.

John looked over the man’s shoulder. Three ruined houses away, a gray Chevrolet Volt was parked. It had to belong to the visitor. It had been a long time since anyone was brave enough, or crazy enough, to park on this street. The gangs in Sugar Land were always on the lookout for easy prey.

The man pulled an ID out of his jacket pocket and held it up to Marshall’s eye level. Homeland Security.

“Agent Moreno. Can I come in for a second?”

“By all means.” Marshall had to force himself to stand aside.

“This your place?” The agent stopped in the foyer. He had craned his neck up and was looking at the stucco decorations on the ceiling.

“Yeah.”

“Plenty of charm, these old buildings. The heating costs in the winter, though! And always something that needs fixing. Must be a major money sink, right?”

“You can say that again.”

What did this guy want? Marshall was used to visits from the

authorities. Hardly a week went by without someone from the city, social services, or the police dropping by. With thirty-one kids that he'd taken in off the street, there was always something to deal with, always some conflict. Normally a few well-chosen words—which Marshall always seemed to find when the time came—were enough. Or, in the absolute worst cases, some hush money to send the person packing. But Homeland Security was a whole different ball game.

"Let's go inside!" said the agent, inviting him in as though he were the host instead of Marshall. He opened the door to the hallway. It creaked loudly, almost drowning out the shuffling of dozens of feet.

The kids. They were curious. And shy. There wasn't one among them who didn't have their own experiences with the authorities. They knew it was better to stay out of sight. Yet at the same time, they wanted to know what was going on, just like Marshall did. What was Homeland Security doing here? There was only one answer: Sid. It had to be about him.

The agent stood in the deserted hallway and slowly turned on his heel, pretending not to notice the many eyes following his every move. "You have street kids here?"

"Yeah," Marshall replied. Then, too hastily for his own taste, he added, "Thirty-one of them. There's nowhere else in the Greater Houston area that'll take them in."

"Thirty-one brats. Sounds pretty draining to me. One of them must always be up to no good, right?"

"Now and again, sure. But they're good kids. You just have to be good to them, and then they're good to those around them."

The agent didn't say a word. He just went up the stairs without invitation.

He certainly had some nerve. It made Marshall angry. The shelter was his home. He should have shouted after the man, confronted him, but he let it go. Homeland Security was a force he was no match for. And there was still Sid: an exposed flank.

The agent went from room to room. He screwed up his nose. "You need to let more air in here."

It was cramped in the bedrooms. The beds—four, five, or six of them together—barely left space to stand.

"I wish we had more room," said Marshall, "but we're at the mercy of the money yielded by our trust. The occasional donations

we get only ever cover the bare necessities."

The stranger didn't reply. Silently, he went through the house, still scrunching his nose and ignoring the scurrying of the children who followed his steps from floor to floor.

Finally, in the attic, he reached Sid's room. A homemade poster hung on the door. "No entry except for intelligent life!" it said on the paper, written in the boy's spidery handwriting with questionable spelling.

The agent knocked but received no answer. "Hello? Anybody home?"

He opened the door and stood in the doorway. Sid had his own space, an outrageous but necessary privilege. He couldn't handle sleeping in the same room as other kids, and Marshall doubted whether the other children could have handled sharing a room with him either.

The walls were plastered with several layers of posters and scraps of paper. Ships, interstellar clouds, torn-off covers of old science fiction magazines that Sid had found in the trash somewhere, and printouts from the net; press releases from NASA—blatant propaganda that Sid swallowed hook, line, and sinker; articles and reports from science websites that proclaimed the universe wasn't actually as bleak and empty as it was; indirect proof of bacteria on Mars, an Earth-like exoplanet many light years away, and much more of the like. The floor was nowhere to be seen. It was covered in printouts, models, and space toys.

The agent stood there in silence, slowly casting his eyes over the room. With the tip of his toe, he pushed aside a model ship that had rolled towards him. A spherical vessel. The optimal shape, Sid had explained to Marshall at great length while crafting the model out of a balloon and papier-mâché.

It reminded Marshall of the sphere from his vision. Was that the explanation? Had his subconscious generated the image of that object, catapulting his mind to a faraway place because he couldn't cope with the frenzy of the crowd anymore?

His pulse throbbed. Now would surely come the agent's big reveal. So far he'd let Marshall stew in his own juices; allowed him to speculate. What had Sid gotten himself into at Nevada Fields? Or had something happened to him?

But no reveal followed. Instead, the agent turned to leave. "Do you have a room too?"

Marshall led him there. It was directly opposite Sid's; the smallest room in the building, little more than a cupboard under the sloping roof. An adult could hardly stand upright in it.

The agent signaled for him to go ahead, then followed him in and closed the door behind them. Marshall wished he could run away. The agent was standing so close that they were almost touching. He could smell the man's deodorant. It was pungent and reminded him of the scent of disinfectant at a hospital.

"I think I've seen enough," the visitor said. "But I have one last question for you. Why is a man of your caliber wasting his life on scum like these dirty, stinking brats?"

"Wh...What? Why would..." Marshall was too taken aback to muster more than awkward babbling.

"I've read up on you, Marshall. Homeland Security has a comprehensive file on you. Until a few years ago, you were one of the most successful investment bankers on Wall Street. A prodigy, you might say. Not even thirty, and you were already set for life. You could have long since had your own company. Set up your own investment funds. Or set out for sunny climes, living the good life."

Marshall grappled for an answer. Struggled to control his anger at the man's arrogance. His narrow-mindedness.

The agent forestalled him. "Let's leave it there." He waved his hand to halt Marshall's reply. "I'm standing knee-deep in the answer. This is the life you want. And here I was thinking I'd seen every kind of crazy that mankind was capable of." He shook his head and opened the door. "Come with me. I have something for you."

Outside the shelter, he waved the waiting car over. The Chevrolet rolled up without a sound and stopped in front of the building. The windows were tinted, blocking any view of the interior.

The driver lowered the side window. He resembled the man who called himself Agent Moreno so closely that they could almost have been twins.

"He's harmless," Moreno told his colleague. "We can let him go."

It hit Marshall then. The agent opened the car's back door and pulled a passenger out onto the street.

Sid González.

The boy was trembling. He kept his head lowered. His

shoulders were slumped. He looked like he wished he could sink through the floor with embarrassment.

"Where did you find him?" asked Marshall.

"Nevada Fields Space Center. In a restricted area right next to the launch tower. He can thank the Lord he didn't get roasted alive."

"How did he get in there?"

"No one knows." The agent shrugged, then turned and went to the passenger door. "Keep a closer eye on him in the future. He had more than a few people sweating."

The man got into the Chevrolet and drove off. Marshall watched the car go until it turned at an intersection under traffic lights that were shot to pieces.

"John," Marshall heard from behind him. "I'm…I'm sorry. It'll never happen again. I promise! I…"

Marshall whirled around. "Do you have any idea how worried I've been about you? Do you know what you've done?"

The boy managed to withstand his withering gaze. "I was careful. Really, I was. I knew exactly where I could go and not be caught in the blast wave."

"I'm not talking about you!" Marshall roared. He couldn't help it. "Did you spare one measly thought for what your little jaunt would mean for the shelter? We're always *this close* to going belly-up! What if that agent wasn't just an arrogant douchebag who found us so disgusting that he thought wasting his time on us was beneath him? What then? Do you want to go back on the street? Do you want us *all* to end up on the street? Is that what you want?"

Sid abruptly turned pale. "I didn't think about that. I…I just wanted to be right up close to Rhodan. To the *Stardust*." He swallowed. "John…it was stupid of me. Really stupid! But it'll never happen again. I promise! I'll make up for it, honest! I—"

Marshall's pod buzzed, interrupting the youth's babbling. He looked at the display. It was Sharon, the manager of their trust. Sharon, who never called him, who always restricted her contact to text messages when she *wanted* him.

He took the call. A face appeared on the display with an immaculate beauty that could be mistaken for an avatar.

"John," said Sharon, "we need to talk. Alone. Can you come over?"

7.

Eleven hours after the *Stardust* touched down on the Moon, the sun rose.

It didn't help much. With virtually no transition at all, the eerie darkness gave way to an equally eerie glare that mercilessly exposed the inhospitable lunar landscape. The *Stardust* had landed on a rugged plain. Stones and rocks lay scattered over a layer of fine dust that had proven to be only a few centimeters deep. With every step, the Moon dust was stirred up and then slowly sank again in the vacuum, in lines as straight as an arrow. The plain was bordered to the north by a mountain range that rose up vertically like a wall, and to the west and south by low rocks that marked the rings of craters. In the east, the plain was swallowed up by the impossibly close horizon.

It was a desolate place—not a place for humans. A place where the eye interpreted the scattered rocks as bones and those bones ultimately as the skeletons of dead behemoths.

Unless a miracle occurred, it was the place where they would die. None of the *Stardust*'s crew believed in miracles, but even so, they worked like men possessed to make one happen.

Bull dabbled with the *Stardust*'s computers. He'd removed the panels from the cockpit and was sitting among a jumble of cables and components, cursing incessantly. It smelled of burning.

Flipper did what came naturally to him as a payload specialist: he took charge of the *Stardust*'s cargo. He opened the flaps of the payload bay and threw everything he considered expendable into a heap in front of the ship that soon stood as tall as a man. With the aid of the crane, he set the tracked vehicle down on the surface, a delicate maneuver that put the vertically angled ship in danger of tipping over. Flipper rose to this challenge with aplomb. Next came the mobile infirmary.

Once the payload specialist had handled all the tasks he could think of, he began to set out on long walks across the lunar landscape. Manoli accompanied him. The doctor and Rhodan could

recognize what Flipper thought was safely hidden away in his heart: his overpowering longing for Beth, who might have been dying at that very moment on the world they'd left behind, in a place that was only barely less hostile to life than the Moon. Flipper would never see her again. What could be more obvious than the idea of being reunited with her in death?

Manoli was ensuring that this remained only an idea.

Rhodan helped Bull with his repair efforts, handing him the tools and giving his friend someone to listen to his cursing. From time to time, he followed Flipper's lead: he put his space suit on, climbed down the ladder that led from the cockpit to the ground, and set out on a walk.

Rhodan enjoyed the lightness of his steps in the Moon's low gravity and hoped that they'd bring with them a lightness of thought. He thought about Pounder. He'd known the old dog for more than a decade. He, Rhodan, was his fosterling. Rhodan had Pounder to thank for becoming an astronaut. It was Pounder who had encouraged him—no, challenged him. The old dog had opened doors for him. Exactly how to walk through them, he'd left to Rhodan. He led by example, shunning explanations. Rhodan's task was to make sense of what he'd been given. So far, he'd managed to do just that. Rhodan believed he knew why Pounder had sent him on this mission.

Only, what was the meaning behind Pounder's remark about a bet? He and Pounder hadn't made any bets, and the Flight Director of NASA was a man who never forgot anything, even supposedly trivial details. That strange remark wasn't like him. There was only one explanation; special circumstances must have prompted it. Circumstances that didn't permit him to speak to Rhodan openly.

A warning.

But a warning about what? Rhodan was still searching in vain for the answer when Bull's cheer of joy boomed through his earphones.

They assembled in front of the *Stardust* after Flipper drove the tracked vehicle a few meters out onto the plain. Bull had brought a heap of fried electronics out of the cockpit—unnecessary for his fact-based argument but indispensable for glorying in his triumph.

"Here, take a look at this!" He held an enclosure in his hand that had once housed one of the *Stardust*'s flash drives. Now it only held charred components. "Burnt out!" He threw it back over with

the other trash. The enclosure missed the pile, bounced off the ground, and somersaulted into the air. In the low gravity, it rose far too high to look natural.

Bull put his hands on his hips. “No wonder Perry had no luck with the reinitialization. Piles of ash aren’t exactly great at rising from the dead!”

Rhodan leaned forward and picked up a charred cable. He held it up in his hand contemplatively. “Do you have an explanation?” he asked.

“Yup.” Bull nodded. He paused for effect, then declared, “EMP.”

“An electromagnetic pulse?” Flipper shook his head. “You’re the system administrator here, Reg. You know this stuff better than I do, but I see two problems with that explanation.”

“Those being?”

“One, the *Stardust*’s electronics are hardened against EMPs. Two, EMPs work invisibly. Electronics turn to scrap; they don’t burn to cinders.”

“Your objections are bang on, Clark,” Bull admitted, still smiling as though nothing could faze him. “Or rather, they *would* be on target if we were dealing with a *conventional* EMP. But we’re not.”

“Then what *are* we dealing with?”

“An attack based on means that are unknown to us. With an enemy for whom it was a piece of cake to detect the *Stardust* and then launch the ‘perfect offensive,’ let’s call it. Without Perry’s quick response, we and the *Stardust* would be looking just as crispy as this pile of junk. If anyone ever salvaged our remains, they’d have thought it was an accident. The black box would have confirmed it. Malfunction in the propulsion unit controls followed by a sudden, unexplained breakdown of the electronics—and *boom*, that was the end of us!”

Flipper shook his head and sought eye contact with Rhodan and Manoli. “That’s crazy, Reg. Someone with that kind of technology at their disposal wouldn’t squander it by deploying it on the far side of the Moon! And who are you suggesting is responsible? The Chinese? The Russians? A private consortium?”

“The same people who put the bases here out of action,” Bull replied, “and took care of all the satellites that were orbiting the Moon.”

Flipper pushed himself off the vehicle and started pacing,

stomping with every step. In the low gravity, the movement looked incongruously soft and gentle. Moon dust rose up, then glistened as it fell tantalizingly slowly to the ground.

"You're seeing ghosts. None of this proves anything." He pointed to the heap of components. "We experienced a technical defect. That's all. We all know we're on a mission that was launched too hastily. The *Stardust* is a prototype—under normal circumstances, they'd have tested it for another two years before sending it to the Moon. Defects are a matter of course. Everything else is just baseless speculation. Dangerous speculation that could risk our—" He stopped short as Bull pulled a metal enclosure out of his thigh pocket. It was unscathed.

"It's not speculation. This flash drive survived the attack. Don't ask me how, because I have no clue. But I know what I found on it."

"And what's that?" asked Manoli.

"The recordings from the infrared cameras. A few milliseconds before our electronics were fried, there was an extreme burst of heat on the surface of the Moon—almost three thousand degrees C. I've localized the point of origin, at least roughly. It's just under two hundred kilometers from our landing zone, and around fifty-five kilometers from the near-side border."

Silence followed that revelation. At last, Flipper said, "Let's say there *is* a connection between these recordings and our emergency landing. How does that help us?"

Bull was about to reply, but Rhodan preempted him. "It helps us plenty. Now we know what we have to do." He got up. "Let's go. There's no time to lose!"

The *Stardust* had barely vanished behind the Moon's oppressive horizon before Bull got straight to the point.

"Out with it, Perry! What did you bring those things along for?"

Rhodan set the vehicle's computer, which had remained intact, to take over steering. Then he turned to his friend. The two men were sitting so close to one another that their space suits were practically touching. The cabin was cramped; it was intended only for brief ventures into the sterile lunar desert.

"Clark and Eric'll feel better if we keep them with us," he replied.

"Sure, maybe, but they tie my stomach in knots. Let's toss them out!"

Bull tried to casually point towards the rear portion of the cabin, but the space suit stopped his arm halfway. That didn't matter, though. Rhodan knew exactly what was sitting there. Two portable rocket launchers. Products of Homeland Security's secret labs. According to the assurances offered by the agent who had explained how to operate them, they were built for "maximum lethality in battlefields characterized by a vacuum."

"You wanted to do that before we even left, Reginald. The department would have noticed. We wouldn't have gotten away with it."

"I'm not so sure about that. At any rate, Homeland Security is a world away. The department can't touch us here. Let's dump the dead weight!"

Rhodan didn't reply. As the Moon dust abruptly turned to coarse gravel that made the vehicle shudder violently, he took over the controls again and slowed to walking speed. They had unfurled the solar cells, which stuck out from the back of the vehicle like wings. Rhodan had to be careful not to let the delicate structures get damaged.

"Come on, Perry!" Bull urged. "Get rid of the damn things! The tracked vehicle's running below target capacity anyway. Shedding a few kilos'll be just what the doctor ordered."

"Below target?" Rhodan looked at Bull, then called up the vehicle's current readings. "Yup, 24.3 percent below target. Got an explanation?"

"Nope, no idea. Maybe the manufacturer ripped off NASA. Maybe the vehicle took a few scrapes when we almost crash-landed." Bull snorted ostentatiously. "I don't give a crap. What I care about are those tools of the devil back there. I didn't become an astronaut to start shooting at the Russians and Chinese. Let's toss them already!"

"No. We might need them." Rhodan's answer came at a speed that made clear to Bull that his friend had thought long and hard about the subject, and that the chances of changing his mind were lower than their chances of finding water on the Moon.

"You know something, Perry? I have a suspicion that you have a suspicion."

"Maybe I do."

"You do, then. Well, let me just say one thing as a friend who cares about you: if *my* suspicion about *your* suspicion is accurate,

these things'll be about as useful as a tennis ball launcher. Worse, even. They could get us killed."

Rhodan gave no ground. "You don't need to agonize over this, Reg. Whatever happens happens. We're keeping them. We can always throw them away later."

They drove on in silence, drawing ever closer to the border that separated the near side of the Moon from the side those on Earth could never catch a glimpse of. After a journey of fifteen hours, they reached their destination.

The tracked vehicle came to a stop on a plain. When the dust settled, they had a clear view of the crescent of the Earth. The blue of the Pacific glistened, and they could see a green landmass that had to have been Japan.

The two men nodded to each other. When it came to their next move, they were in agreement. They checked their suits and slid their visors down.

"Here goes."

Rhodan set the vehicle to drive at full power, and the two were thrown back into their seats. Bull decisively whacked a sensor array with his fist. A jolt ran through the vehicle. Behind the two men, searing light exploded as a probe rode the stream of its rocket propulsion unit into the air at an angle. At that same moment, Rhodan began his com transmission. "This is Perry Rhodan, commander of the *Stardu*—"

He didn't get any further. The vehicle's antenna burst into red-hot droplets as it was struck by a multicolored flash. Embers sprayed out of the transceiver, but it didn't start a fire; the vacuum made that impossible.

A second flash raced across the lunar sky. Above them, the probe burst open in a fireworks-like display, exploding into a fireball that changed color from dazzling white to green and finally to orange.

Rhodan watched the spectacle without any sign of emotion. "Did it work?"

Bull nodded. He grinned like a little boy who'd managed to get one over on a cocky grown-up. He pulled up a zoomed-in map of the Moon on their display. A thin, straight line crossing undeterred past craters and mountains marked the border between the near and far sides. Marking their location was a cross nestled close to the line.

“Here,” he said, superimposing a second cross. It was red and placed on the far side of the Moon, a handspan away from the dividing line. “The origin of those ‘flashes,’ localized down to the meter based on the second measurement. It’s less than fifty kilometers from here.”

“Within reach for us.”

“For the vehicle, sure,” Bull replied, “but not our own reach as humans. If we drive that far, we won’t have enough oxygen to get back to the *Stardust*.”

Still, they decided to drive towards the point where the flashes had originated. It was clear to them both that whoever was behind it would allow neither a distress call nor a flight off the Moon. The only choices they had were to suffocate in the tracked vehicle or back on the *Stardust*, or to die in a fruitless takeoff attempt.

Or they could seek out the unknown.

Both men kept silent, dwelling on their thoughts. Bull had taken over the controls and was driving to their destination with grim determination. Rhodan left him to it. He knew that he could count on his companion, despite the occasional curses his friend hissed under his breath. Bull threw himself behind every wheel, stick, or handlebar he could get his hands on. Regardless of what kind of machine it was, he pushed it to its limits—and miraculously came out unscathed.

Rhodan thought of Pounder again. Why had he sent them there? The sole indication that NASA’s Flight Director had given them of their purpose was the photo he had held under Rhodan’s nose. He’d refrained from any explanations.

“Unnecessary,” he’d growled. “Draw your own conclusions, Rhodan.”

Rhodan had done so. The photo showed a spacecraft, he was sure of that. An enormous vessel that was the product of vastly superior technology. What could he and his men do against such a ship? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Bull swore loudly as their vehicle struggled up a hillside, its motor whirring angrily. “Come on! You’ve gotta be kidding! You’re crawling along like someone back at Nevada Fields filled you up with lead!”

You’re crawling along… The sentence reverberated through Rhodan’s mind. He looked at the rocket launchers sitting behind them. Vastly superior—that’s what the aliens were. These rocket

launchers would be useless. It would be like going up against a tank with a hand ax. What would the tank's crew think of the attacker? They'd laugh at him, maybe pity him. But they'd never take him seriously.

No, Pounder didn't want them to attack. He wanted something else. And Rhodan thought he knew what that "something else" was. But then, why the com transmission? What had Pounder been warning him about?

At last, they reached their destination.

"We're here," said Bull. He brought the tracked vehicle to a stop below a ring of sharp-edged rocks.

They got out and crept up the scree slope with ducked heads, careful not to take any overly large leaps in the low gravity.

When they reached the rocks, they got on all fours, crawled along a bit farther, and gingerly raised their helmeted heads over the edge of the crater.

And saw the ship.

8.

A sign hung over the gate: “Welcome to Bear Creek!” And under that, smaller and in parentheses: “Gated Community.”

To John Marshall, that was another term for prison. A prison built out of congealed fear.

The community was guarded by a four-meter-high, two-tier fence concealed by neatly trimmed evergreen hedges and trees. On top of that, there was comprehensive camera surveillance and a swarm of automated unmanned drones that tirelessly circled over Bear Creek posing as birds. There was also a security force so strong that it could have comfortably served a Central American city-state.

He pedaled hard to make it up the driveway. A bike ride of about fifteen kilometers lay behind him. It was all flat ground and no great effort for Marshall, who exercised regularly. Still, it was the end of June, and lunchtime. No one in Texas was lifting a finger unless they had a good reason to. A *really* good one.

He stopped at the barrier, and a guard came out of the hut between the two lanes. It wasn’t air-conditioned. Patches of sweat stained the man’s armpits.

Marshall didn’t know him. There was a different guard at the gate every time. They were careful at Bear Creek. Familiarity could lead to finding common ground, which could lead to small favors, which in turn led to palm-greasing, and, thus, to gaps in the fence. The ugliness of ordinary life had to stay firmly outside the community gates.

The guard stopped in front of him. “Sir?” It was the bare minimum of friendliness he could summon. A sweat-drenched man on a bicycle had no business being at the gates of Bear Creek.

“John Marshall. I have an appointment with Sharon Tierney at two o’clock.”

The guard looked at the display on his wrist-pod. “It’s 2:38.”

“I know. But it’s hot out, all right?”

The man silently considered him for a moment, and in the end his empathy got the upper hand. He spent all day frying in his tin

hut. He knew what heat was.

"Give me a moment." He went back into the hut, then returned a minute later with a plastic card and handed it to John. "Your permit's valid for ninety minutes. It can be extended for one additional block of sixty minutes by calling the number on the card. Do not try to overstay your visit, please."

The barrier rose up.

Until a few years ago, Bear Creek had been a public park. Then came the hurricane season of 2028, and a consortium had bought up what was left of the grounds. The city had lacked the funds to fix it up themselves.

Bear Creek still resembled a park. The houses were hidden behind hedges and widely dispersed across artificially irrigated lawns. No one could be seen besides staff who were tending to the flowerbeds, picking up nonexistent trash, or painting benches.

As Marshall rolled along lanes scattered with fine gravel and raked several times a day, men and women waved at him. They thought he belonged to them, that he was a courier.

Sharon was waiting for him in her bungalow. "John! Glad you had time on such short notice. Come in!" She offered her hand and shook his, and in doing so made it clear what this visit *wasn't* about.

She led the way to her office. As he followed, he caught himself not wanting to take his eyes off her. Sharon looked amazing. Flawless, as though the rigors of life couldn't touch her at all.

In a manner of speaking, that was true. She had come to Bear Creek with her parents right after the community was first established. A few years ago, her parents had lost their lives in a car accident outside of Bear Creek. The inheritance had been enough for her to buy a lifetime place in the community. John doubted that she had left it even once in the last few years.

"Sit." She gestured towards the guest chair. "A drink?"

"Thanks! Water will do nicely. *Normal* water."

Sharon served him from a jug with an attachment (a water filter) and poured a glass. She filled her own from a machine—activated water, loaded up with the life energy of the universe that encompassed all of existence. During their long dinners (without which an evening with a lover would have been unthinkable for her), they had often had bitter arguments about this sort of nonsense. The machine needed monthly replacement cartridges, and each cartridge cost as much as Marshall needed to provide for

his kids for that same length of time. Eventually, he'd given up on arguing with her and restricted their relationship to the two areas where they were in harmony: sex and money. Although, as he'd discovered, the arguments had only inflamed their passions.

Sharon handed him the glass and sat down behind the desk, which was as smooth and flawless as she was. It was made of glass and served to support a display that stood on one impossibly thin, translucent base, and a keyboard as thin as a sheet of paper.

"I'll cut to the chase," she said. "It's over."

"What?"

"The Human Health Foundation. Your trust. It's insolvent."

Marshall came close to spilling his drink. "That's impossible! The assets were distributed widely enough to absorb any risk imaginable!"

"True. Your portfolio is set up well. Uncannily well. The best I've ever seen. It's almost like you have some kind of sixth sense. But even if you were a wizard, there'd be nothing left for you to do tricks with. The markets are in free fall."

"That can't be!" Marshall tried to read her expression. This was a joke. It had to be. A bad, tasteless joke. Or retaliation for the wounds their arguments had inflicted.

He had no luck. Sharon's face was a mask, as it always was when he wasn't sleeping with her.

"It's like I said. Here, I'll show you." She snapped, and the display woke up from standby. Her fingers—or rather her long, painted fingernails—scurried over the keyboard as she pulled up the prices of shares, indexes, and funds. She was right. Every single one, without exception, was plummeting.

"But that's impossible!" Marshall was struggling to accept the truth. "How could that happen?"

"Don't you follow the news?"

"No, and you know that. There's no point." He had freed himself from the never-ending news cycle when he'd left his life as an investment banker behind.

"The news is our world. Sometimes it's worth taking a look over the garden fence." Sharon winked. "And you know what? The world is falling apart. The bloom is off the rose."

He stared at her in silence. What the hell did she know about the world?

"John, something's not right out there."

“You don’t need to tell *me* that!”

“Don’t be childish! It’s not my fault. I’m just the bearer of bad news, okay?”

“What *is* the news, then?”

“We’re running on empty, practically and spiritually. 2036 is shaping up to be a lousy year. We’re expecting bad harvests in the Northern Hemisphere’s most important growing regions. Demand for oil, gas, and coal have long since outstripped supply, and debts have reached a breaking point.”

“You call that news? It sounds just like the last broadcast I caught in New York...in July 2030.”

“Yes, but it’s different this time. People can endure unimaginable things, but there’s one thing they can’t: hopelessness. We’ve reached a point where too many people in power believe that only drastic action can free them from their plight. There’s going to be war, John. *Wars*. Only a miracle can save us.”

“I don’t believe in miracles. You should know that by now. What about the assets I invested at fixed interest rates?”

“All used up. The fire in the workshop three years ago. The insurance didn’t pay out. Why would it? One of your beloved kids started it. The reconstruction work cost more than the trust could cover. You remember? I told you that you were living beyond your means. That nothing was allowed to go wrong.”

Marshall ignored her remark—on the surface, anyway. In fact, she’d hit home. He had rebuilt the workshop against his better judgment. But what other choice did he have? The children needed something to do. Otherwise, the main building would have gone up in flames within weeks as well.

“How much are we missing?” he asked.

“22,192 dollars and 73 cents. That’s the next payment due.”

“When?”

“In nine days.”

“What about a short-term loan? Until the market rebounds.”

Sharon shook her head. “All long since exhausted. What I could actually get, that is, which wasn’t a whole lot. The trust doesn’t have any collateral to speak of. The shelter itself is worth nothing. No one in their right mind wants property in Sugar Land.” Her expression remained impassive, almost as rigid as stone. But did her eyes have a moist sheen? “I’m sorry, John. I know how much the shelter means to you.”

Marshall looked past Sharon to the garden outside. She bred orchids. It was her passion and a profitable source of income on the side. She was good at whatever she set her mind to. The garden was beautiful; unnaturally so. He felt cold.

Sharon stood up, went over to him, and took his hands in hers. "John, you think this is the end. But that's not true. Every ending is a new beginning. A new life is waiting for you. Bear Creek. The next bungalow over is for sale. The couple couldn't put up the membership fees anymore. I could...well, play the system a little. Withdraw the last cash from the trust before it collapses. It would be enough to buy your way into the community. Imagine, you could shake off all the grime of the world..."

"The world that's on the brink of ruin? Isn't that what you just told me?"

"Who knows what'll happen? I can't see into the future. All I know is that we only have one life to live. And that everyone should look out for themselves first and foremost. You've wasted enough time on other people. It's time to grow up!"

Marshall freed his hands from her grasp. "I'll think about it," he whispered and left.

He managed the return journey in less than thirty minutes.

A knock.

It was timid. So soft that you could have mistaken the sound for the creaking of the ramshackle wooden staircase.

John Marshall ignored it. He didn't want to go to the door. He wanted to stay hunched up in front of the screen, calling up chart after chart, checking and analyzing trends, noting account and portfolio balances. On and on and on, in the vague, dubious hope that Sharon was mistaken, that she'd overlooked something. Some minuscule detail, a misplaced decimal point, that would somehow make the trust last for one more month.

"John?" came a whisper just as timid as the knock.

Sid.

Marshall took a deep breath. "What is it?"

"Can I come in?"

No! he wanted to reply. *I'm busy!* But he let it be. It was pointless. He'd spent hours searching for a glimmer of hope and hadn't found one. He *wouldn't* find one. Sharon's analysis was as flawless as she was. The trust, and thus the shelter, and thus he and

the children, including Sid...they were at the end of their rope.

"Please!" Sid implored. "It won't take long. I promise."

"Come in."

The door opened, and Sid scampered into the room, pushing it closed behind him. He sat down on Marshall's bed. It was the only seat on offer; the room didn't have enough space for a second chair.

The boy's hair was wet. He had taken a shower—a rare occurrence. Sid showered maybe once a month, and then only under threat of a week's kitchen duty.

"Am I bothering you?" he asked without looking at Marshall.

"No, why?" Marshall realized that he'd forgotten to switch off the display. He closed the charts. "I was just doing some bookkeeping. What's up, Sid?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"And you think I can help you with that?"

The boy briefly raised his shoulders, then let them slump down again. "I had a shower. You always say hot water makes you sleepy. When I was heading back to my room, I saw your light was still on through a crack in the door." He raised his eyes. "Did you hear? Com contact with the *Stardust* got cut off just after they entered the Moon's orbit. The ship's MIA."

"Nope, I had no idea. That's sad."

Marshall stopped himself from observing that Rhodan and the other astronauts were grown men who had permitted themselves to be shot up to the Moon of their own free will. He didn't wish them ill. He just didn't see why he should care about the fate of four people who had turned their backs on Earth's problems.

"What happened?" he asked. "An accident?"

"Probably. No one knows. People are saying they're dead, but I don't believe that. Rhodan and Bull are too smart to go down so easily."

Wishful thinking! thought Marshall. At that same moment, he realized that Sid's approach to the *Stardust* was no different from his approach to the financial situation with the trust. He didn't want to accept what couldn't be.

"Out with it!" said Marshall, changing the subject. "You didn't come visit me at three in the morning just to tell me about the *Stardust*, did you?"

Sid shook his head. "No. I...I wanted to apologize again. What I did at Nevada Fields was stupid. Really dumb. I was only thinking

about myself, and I put the shelter in danger. I didn't mean to." He held out his open palms apologetically. The skin was pale, almost lacking in color, as if it had been scalded before and then grown back.

"Don't worry too much. You didn't mean any harm."

"But what I did was harmful!"

"No, you just didn't think about what your actions could mean for other people. That's all. It's only human. But you've understood your mistake, too. You've learned from it. You'll never do something like that again; I know that. And that's the main thing."

Marshall believed that. But he also wanted Sid to leave. He was tired. He didn't know what to do with himself or his worries, nor did he know if the shelter would still exist in a week. But maybe if he went through all the investments one more time, he'd find a mistake after all...

"I don't know what came over me," said Sid. "I just wanted to be right up close to the *Stardust*. And then..."

"That's understandable. Rhodan, Bull, and the others are your heroes."

Sid had once explained to Marshall why he'd come to Houston. The boy had believed that Johnson Space Center was still in operation. A misapprehension. The hurricanes of 2028 had smashed the whole facility. So thoroughly, in fact, that it had prompted NASA to opt for a complete exodus from the region and build a new base in Nevada, far away from the storms that increasingly plagued the coasts.

"Yeah. I wished I could be up there with Rhodan. Flying into space. But, listen, John, sometimes I'm afraid of what's inside of me!"

"You don't have to be. You're still young. It's normal to push the boundaries, and to break them."

"Maybe. But it's *different* for me. I..."

"That's normal too. Teenagers always feel different from everyone else." He stood up and went over to the door, ducking his head as always to avoid hitting it on the sloped ceiling. He put his hand on the doorknob. "Anything else? To be honest with you, I'm kind of tired."

Sid started to get up. But he stopped mid-motion and let himself fall backwards onto the bed. He raised his head, sought out Marshall's gaze, and held it firmly. His hands were shaking. It was

costing all his strength to keep it up.

"John, you're not listening to me at all! Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Where did you get that idea? I'm just tired. I've hardly slept the past few nights. I've been worried about you, and..."

"I'm sorry! The man from Homeland Security said it was all settled. Right? Didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"But you're still worried. I didn't want that."

"I'm not worried about you anymore, Sid. No more than usual, anyway."

"About Tyler and Damon, then? I heard they had a fight while I was away."

"Yeah, the twins are giving me grief, Sid. Are you happy now?"

Sid pondered the question, then shook his head. "That's still not everything. Does it have something to do with that?" He pointed at the monitor. "You normally never surf the web."

"I told you already. Bookkeeping."

"And you went to see Sharon. Is it over between you two?"

"How do you know about me and Sharon?" Marshall asked, more loudly than he'd intended. His hand closed tightly around the doorknob.

Sid shrank in on himself again. "Sorry. I thought you knew that I knew. The whole shelter knows."

"Interesting." And actually, Marshall should have expected it. Life on the street had traumatized these kids. It had also sharpened their senses. They were clever. "Fine, then I hereby state for the benefit of you and everyone else: it's not over. Also, whatever is or isn't going on between me and Sharon is none of your business. That clear?"

"Clear as day. Then are you worried about money?"

"What?" In his surprise, John almost ripped the knob from the door. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Well, you know, Sharon manages our money. Sue told me. And you had a whole load of numbers and dollar signs on the screen. I just thought..."

Marshall fell silent and considered. Whatever he said or didn't say, the whole shelter would know tomorrow. Sid was on the right track. He had to give him something that was plausible but wouldn't cause too much commotion.

“Fine. I went to see Sharon. About money. One of the funds I’ve invested in for the trust is in bad shape.”

“Is the shelter in danger?”

“No. We’ll just have to tighten the purse strings for a while, that’s all. That’s why I’m still up in the middle of the night trying to figure it out. Happy?”

“Can I help? Can I do something?”

“Yes. You can go to bed now. And don’t go spreading crap to the other kids, all right?”

Marshall turned the knob and pulled the door open. Sid left without putting up any further resistance.

“Good night, John.”

“Good night, Sid.”

9.

"That...that can't be! It's impossible!" Bull groaned. "Perry, tell me I'm dreaming! Tell me something's wrong with the air mixture in my suit! Or at least that I've lost my mind! Something, Perry!"

"You're wide awake, and both your suit and your brain are in full working order," Rhodan replied without taking his eyes off the ship.

There before them, having landed on the crater floor, was an enormous sphere with a bulge running around its circumference halfway up. It rested on two dozen landing legs, each of them taller than the *Stardust*.

Diameter: 492.38 meters flashed his suit's laser-based range finder automatically at the lower edge of his helmet. A nearly five hundred-meter diameter.

Rhodan cast his mind back to his childhood, a quarter of a century in the past. His grandfather had taken him to the Gulf, to Dubai. The eleven-year-old boy hadn't questioned what had prompted the sudden trip. He hadn't suspected that his grandfather was suffering from leukemia and would die a few weeks later.

Rhodan remembered how he had craned his neck up at the foot of the Burj Khalifa and tried to spot the very tip of the skyscraper. He hadn't succeeded; it was too far away, and the midday sun had gleamed too brightly. In wide-eyed wonder, he had taken in the details shared by the tour guide: 828 meters tall, the highest man-made structure ever erected. 163 floors, over three hundred thousand square meters of floor space, millions of kilometers of cables, a weight of tens of thousands of tonnes.

"You knew, Perry," Bull whispered now. "You knew right from the start. And you didn't breathe a word of it."

"I didn't *know*; I just had an idea. That was all. I couldn't have known about *this*. No one could have imagined it."

Rhodan thought back again. The Burj Khalifa was taller than this ship, but that was a thin, exceedingly elegant needle. This alien ship was a sphere; its sheer volume exceeded the skyscraper's many

times over. And the Burj Khalifa was, despite the sense of lightness it exuded, a building—an unshakable structure of concrete and steel. This was a starship, a world unto itself. A self-sufficient world that could travel across light years. This vessel came neither from Earth nor from one of the other planets in the terrestrial solar system. It came from a distance far out of reach for humans.

Bull tugged at his sleeve with his gloved fingers. “Come on, let’s get out of here before someone down there spots us!”

“You don’t think they did that ages ago?”

“Who says they did? We’re just flies, and the *Stardust* is a speck compared to that thing.”

“Sure, maybe we are flies to them. But if so, we’re pesky ones.” Rhodan made no move to turn away from the ship. “Think of those flashes. They’ve known about us for quite a while. They tried to crash the *Stardust*, and they prevented us from making any contact with Earth. They’ve silenced Armstrong and the other Moon bases. If we try to take off and head home, they’ll kill us.”

“And you think our chances are any better if we stay here?”

“At least then we have *some* chance.”

Bull considered for a moment. Then he realized what his friend had in mind. “You... You want to...”

“Pay a visit to those folks down there? Precisely.”

Bull shook his head so vigorously that his helmet rocked from side to side. “Have you lost your damn mind? Perry, we are *flies*! Bugs. Vermin. They’ll leave us in peace as long as we leave them down there in peace. What they definitely *won’t* do is cheerfully open the door and invite us in for tea! Dammit, Perry, they’re gods compared to us!”

“I don’t care for that expression. But if you insist...the beings down there might be gods, but if so, they’re fallen gods.” Rhodan extended an arm and pointed to the right, towards the edge of the crater. The rough, jagged rocks were smoothly flattened at a slanted angle.

“Take a look at the crater’s edge. It’s like someone cut it off with a gigantic knife. It wasn’t a knife, though. It was that ship. They had an emergency landing. No, a *crash* landing. Just like us. Only the aliens didn’t pull it off as smoothly as we did with the *Stardust*. Their ship took a hefty chunk of the crater ring along with it.”

Bull considered the sliced-off rocks for a brief moment, then

said, “All right, it was probably a crash landing. But Perry, look at their ship! Not a scratch on it!”

Rhodan waved his hand dismissively. “So what? That tells us a little about the beings who designed and built this ship, maybe. But we’re not dealing with them—the crash landing is proof of that!—but rather with the ones who are *flying* it. They’re not gods. They’re fallible. And they might even need our help.”

“Our help!” Bull exhaled with a groan. “Unless there’s some miracle, we’ll suffocate in seven hours, and you’re fantasizing about helping these aliens in their wonder ship!”

Rhodan ignored his protest. “Their crash landing made an excellent road. I’ll bet the tracked vehicle can reach the crater floor in less than an hour, if driven by a man with the requisite skills.” He gave Bull a clap on the shoulder. “So come on! What are you waiting for?”

Bull achieved the feat in less than forty-five minutes. The heat from the friction had baked the stone into an almost perfectly even surface. He concentrated on steering, focusing his eyes rigidly on the stretch of road before him as the alien ship grew ever larger and more threatening, ultimately seeking to smother them with its shadow.

Upon reaching the bottom of the crater, Bull stopped the vehicle. They were so close that the protruding ring blocked their view of the upper part of the ship. Its underside was lined with the round openings of propulsion units, each one large enough to swallow up the *Stardust* with room to spare.

“What now?” Bull asked quietly.

“We get out, of course.” Rhodan turned around, took one of the rocket launchers, and left the vehicle. Bull stood stock still for a moment and stared at his friend, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Then, cursing, he followed him, sans rocket launcher.

Slowly, the two men made their way to the ship.

Nothing happened.

“Perry, I have two things to say to you.”

“Go right ahead!” Rhodan had shouldered the rocket launcher. No emotion could be read on his face.

“I’m more scared than I’ve ever been in my whole damn life,” Bull whispered. “I don’t want to die. If we…no, in the *highly unlikely event* that we make it through this in one piece, I have a feeling

nothing's ever going to be the same again."

Rhodan nodded. "That's about where I am too. What's the second thing?"

"When we—I mean, *if* we get through this, promise me you won't tell anyone else how terrified I was, okay?"

Rhodan was stunned into silence for a moment, then he burst out laughing. An unfamiliar voice joined him in his laughter.

Bull halted abruptly. "Did you hear that too?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?" He turned on his heel as if he'd be able to catch sight of the voice's owner somewhere in the immediate vicinity.

Rhodan shook his head. "That won't help. Come on!" He kept going, slower than before.

Bull followed him, quietly murmuring to himself. As he caught up with Rhodan, the ship lit up for a moment.

Both men froze and raised their hands to protect their eyes from the sudden flood of light. When the light faded, a see-through barrier surrounded the ship like a second skin. It reminded Rhodan of glass. Viewed from an angle, it was transparent, bordering on invisible. If you took just one step or cocked your head to the side, it shimmered like the air on a hot summer's day.

"An energy shield, if you ask me," said Bull. "This must have been how they shaved off the crater edge. We're not getting through that. Touching it with one finger is probably enough to get you vaporized. Let's turn back while we still can, Perry. No one wants us here!"

"No. We're staying." Rhodan kept his gaze fixed on the ship as he spoke. "I didn't come all this way to suffocate in the lunar wasteland when rescue is so close at hand." He took the rocket launcher off his shoulder and cocked it.

"Perry, no!" Bull shouted. "That's crazy!"

Rhodan paid him no mind. He spun around, turning his back on the alien ship, put his finger on the trigger, and fired. A dozen rockets flew from the barrel and hurtled like glowing darts towards the tracked vehicle. A heartbeat later, it vanished in a silent explosion.

Bull watched the destruction of their own transport with eyes widened in shock. "Perry," he whispered, "why the hell did you do that? Dammit, *why*?" He trembled with fear and helplessness.

"We don't need it anymore, Reg."

“But you...”

“It’s better this way,” said Rhodan. “Remember Pounder’s comment about our supposed bet? It was a warning. Those rocket launchers weren’t the only present that Homeland Security gave us.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Think about the vehicle and its unaccountably low performance. We were dragging extra weight around with us. And if you ask me, it was a bomb.”

Rhodan threw the rocket launcher onto the dusty ground, discarding it. Then he turned around and set his transceiver signal to maximum strength.

Loudly and slowly, he said, “This is Perry Rhodan, astronaut of the national space agency of the United States of America, commander of the vessel *Stardust*, and inhabitant of the third planet of this solar system—a human. With me is Reginald Bull, who is, despite his incurable fondness for cursing, the most open, honest, and upstanding person I’ve ever encountered. He’s the best companion anyone could ask for.”

Rhodan paused. No answer came, but no laughter either.

“We’re in distress—distress of your making. We ask for your help.”

Rhodan started walking, moving closer to the energy shield.

“You may be of the view that my friend and I aren’t worth saving,” he continued. “You may see us as savages, no different from animals. Our ship, where our two brave companions, Eric Manoli and Clark Flipper, are currently waiting, may seem like a toy to you. Our efforts may seem laughable and doomed to failure from the very start. Maybe you watch them for a short while, like a human might casually watch a beetle crawling along. In your boredom, you might put obstacles in the beetle’s path to see how it struggles against them. Finally, when you’re tired of the game, you abandon the beetle to its fate.”

Rhodan took a breath. He was now less than fifty meters from the energy shield.

“That could all be true,” he went on. “But I cannot, *will not* believe it. Because, I ask myself, how could such thoughtless and cruel beings construct a marvel like the ship that my friend and I are standing in awe of? Isn’t it a monument to your phenomenal abilities, the undeniable evidence of your moral maturity? Yes,

maturity. Because how else could your civilization have soared to such heights without its members killing each other along the way? You definitely have the means necessary."

Thirty meters to the shield.

"And, I ask myself, could beings of such high a moral standing as yours really come to look down on others? Wouldn't these beings have the humility within themselves that goes hand in hand with true greatness? The knowledge that they themselves were once primitive? The knowledge that what counts isn't how immense a spacecraft one is capable of building, but the very ability to build them at all, of boldly forging ahead into the unknown? The knowledge that only the being itself counts—its intelligence, its feelings, its consciousness? That a self-explanatory duty exists in the universe to help those in need, regardless of who or what those beings may be?"

Twenty meters.

"You might argue that we humans aren't worth saving," Rhodan acknowledged. "You may look at the Earth and regard what we've done to it with horror. You may point to the wars we've waged on each other, or the hunger we can't seem to stamp out. The torture our governments order in the name of noble goals, or the man who drinks and hits his wife and children. The tax collector who accepts bribes to pass through drugs that kill hundreds and plunge thousands into immeasurable sorrow. The thief who steals the fruit of other people's honest labor."

Ten meters.

"There's no denying it. Those people are humans. Their actions are human. However, there's more to humanity than that alone. There's the compassion that motivates us to give to others without expecting anything in return. The forgiveness we show those who have done unforgivable things. And we humans dream too."

Five meters.

"Two of these humans stand before you. My friend and I, we are dreamers. We believe in the good of humanity. We believe there must be another life for us, free from the fetters of the Earth and the burdens of our history. For ourselves and for humanity. We believe that the Earth is our cradle, but the universe is our home."

Two meters.

"I beg you, don't shatter our belief."

The shield flickered and vanished. In the hull above Rhodan, an

opening appeared. A beam of yellow light shone from it and formed a cone on the crater floor. Invisible hands clutched at Rhodan and carried him towards the opening. More hands clutched at Bull, who had followed a few meters behind Rhodan, and carried him upward as well.

In the opening, the invisible hands set both men down. Lightness gave way to a pull of gravity stronger than the Moon's. Based on the brutal sudden force with which his suit's supply pack pulled him backward, Rhodan guessed it was roughly the same as the Earth's.

Behind the two of them, the opening in the hull closed without a sound. A hiss filled the space—the sound of an atmosphere rushing in.

Then a voice spoke in their earphones in clear English. "You can take off your helmets, humans. The gas mixture is breathable for you."

It was the same voice that had laughed with them a few minutes before.

10.

"Welcome to the Pain Shelter! I'm glad to see such an incredible turnout."

A dozen tourists had arrived on the bus that John Marshall rented specifically for the tour every Wednesday. This was a good day. Often, only two or three lost souls strayed into Sugar Land.

Marshall continued to offer the tours anyway. He knew that he was doing good by running the shelter, but he was a realist; he knew that "doing good" wasn't enough on its own. If you wanted to *really* make an impact, you had to share it with the world. Even on days like this, when Marshall would much rather have holed up in his room.

"My name is John Marshall," he continued. "I run the shelter. And this is..." He paused briefly. The front door flew open, and with a daring somersault, a figure leaped down the half-dozen steps to the sidewalk, then sprung up next to him and bowed.

"Allow me to introduce my charming assistant, Sue!"

The tourists fell into a stunned silence for a moment. Then the reflexes instilled in them since childhood kicked in: they clapped.

"Thank you!" Sue panted, glowing every bit as brightly as the June sun. "Thank you, thank you!"

The girl was a puzzle to Marshall. A year ago, she'd started accompanying him when he gave his tours. Little by little—he couldn't have named a clear turning point—the tours had turned into her big weekly performance.

Sue loved it. She positively lived for it. She had rustled up an old circus costume from somewhere. Its sequins glistened like new, but it was far too big for her, baggy all over, and not only around her left arm, where she had gathered the material over the stump to conceal it from their visitors.

Marshall cleared his throat. "Over the next half hour, we'll give you a sense of our work and our lives here at the Pain Shelter. We're hoping you'll see what makes it so irreplaceable." He looked at the girl encouragingly. "Sue?"

“Follow me, please! This way, around the building!”

She led the party at a snail’s pace by her standards, but the tourists had difficulty keeping up. An elderly man with a hunched back fell behind slightly. He walked with a limp.

“We’re situated in a suburb called Sugar Land,” Sue explained as they walked, every bit the proud tour guide. “As the name suggests, the area was once a major center of sugar production. Sugar Land was founded by the Imperial Sugar Company at the beginning of the last century as a ‘company town,’ offering the workers everything they needed to live their lives. The refinery was closed and demolished at the start of the century, and then the storms of 2028 led to a general downfall of the Texan coastal regions.”

Sue stopped for a moment and waited until the older man had caught up. She looked like a child—she *was* a child—but she had a sensitivity to others’ needs that few adults could match.

“The building that houses the shelter today was originally built as worker accommodations. Five years ago, the trust bought up the decaying building, extensively renovated it, and transformed it into an asylum for street children. In the Greater Houston area,”—a crease formed on her forehead, giving her a serious air—“it’s estimated that more than ten thousand children are currently living on the streets with no parents. Here at the shelter, we try to alleviate this suffering. Now, take a look, ladies and gentlemen! I think the results speak for themselves!”

Sue stepped behind the building and presented the tourists with a view of the garden. Nestled among the bone-dry industrial wasteland, stretching almost as far as the eye could see, it was like an oasis in the desert. This part was always good for oohs and aahs.

Sue spent hours in the garden every day. She dug the soil, did the watering, went from plant to plant and stroked them all. It was like they were pets, and she couldn’t get enough of their silky coats. But much of the time, she just sat or lay there, eyes closed, and dreamed. Of what, Marshall couldn’t say. He had a feeling it would have been pointless to ask her. The girl wouldn’t have given him an answer.

Today, as ever, the garden achieved the desired result. The tourists stopped to take photos and videos of this miniature miracle. While they were distracted, Marshall took the chance to get a better look at the group. Most of them were American, a handful of young

people with backpacks. Idealists who, at the end of the tour, tended to offer to work at the shelter as volunteers, which Marshall always politely but firmly declined. There were also two wealthy Asian couples getting a personal glimpse at the downfall of the West. Despite the heat, the women wore thin gloves. Marshall was almost surprised that they weren't wearing face masks as well.

Then there was the elderly man with the hunched back. He wore a suit that Marshall knew from his former life to be an outrageously expensive tailor-made designer piece. At the same time, it had been worn for so long that it was threadbare in places and had even been patched up around the knees and elbows. It was like the man had taken on the onerous duty of having one presentable outfit, but only once, a long time ago, and he'd never realized how odd it made him look.

Sue invited the tourists to sample the cherry tomatoes, enjoying their looks of surprise and approval. At last, she said, "Now let's head to the workshop!"

The workshop stretched out next to the garden. This long, flat hall, new and shiny like one of the space stations on Sid's posters, had cost an extortionate sum of money that had probably been the nail in the trust's coffin. It hurt Marshall to even look at it.

"The garden is our little paradise," Sue explained, "but trust me, the workshop is the beating heart of the shelter." She held the double doors open for the tourists.

It was pleasantly cool inside thanks to a passive air conditioning system. Kids were working at the workbenches and semi-autonomous machines all over the room.

"Here, we repair and refurbish abandoned bicycles from across the Greater Houston area. We also make handicrafts."

Sue went over to a table covered with metal objects, which had been placed by the entrance as if by coincidence. She picked one up. It was an eagle swooping down on a rodent, fashioned out of old tin cans. One of Damon's many works of art.

Only Sid produced crafts of a higher caliber: rockets and ships of all descriptions. Normally, he didn't pass up the chance to convince the tourists to buy his creations, but today he was nowhere to be seen. He must have still been in bed, which was for the best. Marshall wasn't the only one who had been pushed to the brink over the past few days.

"But that's not enough for us," Sue continued. "We never rest

on our laurels here at the Pain Shelter. We're always looking for new ways to make ourselves useful and financially independent. Our newest source of income is—don't laugh—shopping carts. We collect them from the roadside ditches they always end up in, put them back in working order, and sell them to the big malls."

They moved through the workshop and past Damon and Tyler. The twins were assembling a bicycle together, both lost in their work. No one looking at them would have had the slightest inkling that just one day earlier, they'd been on the verge of slicing each other open.

"We have a strong emphasis on community here. Each of us serves the whole to the best of our ability, and in return we can make use of the community's services. And that's deeply rewarding, as you'll experience first-hand in the kitchen right now!"

A creamy, fruity dessert and a glass of chilled water awaited the tourists in the shelter's large kitchen. This treat normally came an hour later in the program, after a complete walk through the building and a presentation from Marshall about the motivations and goals of the Human Health Foundation. Sensing how worn out he was, Sue had shortened the tour for his sake.

She was unbelievable. Marshall made eye contact with her to thank her. It was children like Sue, moments like these, that gave him the strength to carry on.

"Any questions?" the girl inquired after each tourist had taken a bowl.

A young woman with a backpack spoke up. "The children we've seen are almost fully grown adults. What'll happen to them when they leave the shelter?"

Sue laughed. "It's better not to take the word 'children' too literally. Our main focus here is helping those in need." She paused thoughtfully as furrows formed on her brow. "What happens to us? It varies. A lot of us manage to build a life outside the shelter. Some falter. That's a real shame, and every one who doesn't make it is one too many. Still, without the shelter, none of us would even have a chance. Living alone on the street makes for a short and tragic existence."

"What about discipline?" asked one of the Asian men. His English had no detectable accent. "There must be a lot of conflict, right?"

"We don't go a single hour without any, to be honest. But that's

true anywhere. So far, we've always managed to patch things up. Emotions run high, but trust me, we know what we've got here at the shelter."

The hunched man cleared his throat. "Earlier you said that there are more than ten thousand homeless children in the Greater Houston area?" He had a British accent.

"That's right."

"How many does the Pain Shelter have room for? Twenty-five? Thirty?"

"Well guessed. Exactly thirty-one."

"A drop in the ocean, then. Why don't you expand the shelter? Or build more of them?"

"I think John would like nothing better." Sue glanced at Marshall. "But sadly, it's not that simple. We don't have the money. We already have to scrimp and save wherever we can. The garden gives us fruit and vegetables, and we fix up the building ourselves. You know, one of our residents, Sid, is obsessed with space travel. He's always saying we're like astronauts flying in a ship through the distant reaches of space...alone in our own little world."

"An interesting image, but not quite accurate," the old man replied. "A spacecraft can only exist and operate because ground control is there." This man with the threadbare suit spoke to Sue as if she were an adult. Not only that, he truly looked at her, which was unusual. Generally, the tourists' gazes wandered over to Marshall while the girl was talking.

"That's true." She nodded earnestly, then added, "Besides, what would be the point in a spacecraft with no home to go back to?"

A stunned silence was her only reply. Where had the girl gotten these insights? She never ceased to surprise John—or herself.

Sue shook herself off as if shocked by what she'd just said and eager to break the tension. She lifted her healthy arm and looked at her watch.

"Looks like our time's almost up," she announced, having returned to her detached tour guide persona. "The bus will take you back to the tourist office in ten minutes." She delivered a fine curtsy. "Thank you for taking the time to visit us. We hope you enjoyed it. You're free to use these last few minutes however you like, but I must point out that our workshop store is open. Don't miss your one and only chance to surprise your friends and family back home with a truly unique souvenir. Who wouldn't want a fully

refurbished Walmart shopping cart?"

That got the laughs she was aiming for. The tourists followed her into the workshop, where she would switch on all her charms to earn a few extra dollars for the trust.

The hunched man in the patched suit remained in the kitchen.

"Can I help you?" Marshall asked.

"Perhaps. If you allow me to help you first." He retrieved an old-fashioned wallet and a ballpoint pen from the inside pocket of his jacket. The wallet was secured with a chain. He took a check out of the wallet, assured himself that the countertop was clean and dry, and wrote something on the paper. Then he handed Marshall the check.

It was made out to the trust. A donation.

Twenty-two thousand, one hundred and ninety-two dollars and seventy-three cents.

The two of them went for a walk.

Sugar Land wasn't exactly the sort of place where people did that, but Marshall refused to kick the habit. He lived for the shelter, but he had to get some distance from his life there at regular intervals. He went walking, jogging, or cycling depending on how his day there was going.

So far, no one had ever bothered him on his excursions. On his good days, he believed this was because the locals were aware of him and what he stood for. On his bad days, when the kids had almost driven him insane, he believed it was because he didn't own a single thing worth mugging him for.

The man in the suit limped along beside him. He seemed unconcerned, as if he hadn't picked up on what kind of area he was in. As if it had escaped his notice that he'd traveled to the shelter in an armored bus. Or was he simply unflinching in a similar way to Marshall? Driven by a strong purpose to which everything else played second fiddle?

The elderly man pulled out a checkered handkerchief and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. "Is it always so hot here?"

"In the summer, yes. And every summer's hotter than the last. You get used to it, though. It used to be humid here too, but now it's a dry heat. The scientists are predicting that this area will become a desert within a generation."

"Too dry for my taste."

The man's accent seemed surreal to Marshall, like he was a character from an old movie—an eccentric lord in a ragged designer suit. Or an old servant, a man Friday, who had been kept around for sentimental reasons.

The question was, what had brought someone like this to Sugar Land? Marshall was proud of his intuition when it came to people. He could generally sense what was going on with whomever he talked to. This strange old man had left him at a loss.

"You do admirable work here, Mr. Marshall."

"Thanks." He said it quietly, hesitantly. He found it difficult to accept praise.

"It would bring me great pleasure to help you with your work."

This was something else that Marshall struggled to accept: pushy, patronizing offers of assistance.

"How do you know we need help? What kind of magic trick was that with the check?" He had tried to return it, but the stranger had simply left it on the counter. After a long moment of indecision, Marshall had put the check away to ensure that none of the kids found it. There was more than enough chaos at the shelter already.

The older man smiled. "Come now, I had to get your attention somehow, didn't I?"

"Why bother? If you wanted to help so badly, you could have made a transfer to the foundation's account any time you wanted. That doesn't require a personal visit."

"What, and miss out on this?" He stretched out an arm in a sweeping gesture across the wasteland that had once been a model city. A little utopia made by well-intentioned industrialists. Naturally, it had run aground, like every utopia. "And the pleasure of meeting you, of course."

"I don't know if I'd call it a pleasure."

"Don't sell yourself short, Marshall. We're only human; we make mistakes. You've achieved something remarkable. I was curious about you, and I wanted to make sure that you were the right one."

"For what?"

"Listen, I'm a wealthy man. Obscenely rich, as a matter of fact. For me, it would be a matter of no consequence to put this trust of yours back on solid ground, financially speaking. My means are, let's say, considerable."

"Despite the crisis?"

“Despite the crisis. With the right intuition, it’s possible to be among the winners even while prices are crashing through the floor, you know.”

The man was talking nonsense. Self-important nonsense on an epic scale. Marshall should have rejected his offer. He had frequently encountered these delusions of grandeur in his time as an investment banker. There were plenty of men and women who rode the wave of rising prices. They soared higher and higher, drunk on their own importance and wisdom, ultimately convincing themselves they were above the system. They believed they could keep their heads above water while all the other investors were being dragged into the vortex of downward trends.

It was a fallacy. No one was above the system.

Marshall didn’t reject the offer, however. He was too desperate for that. The shelter was hanging by a thread. It was everything he lived for. He was ready to grasp at any straw.

There was another reason too: this man was different. The respect he had shown Sue, treating her like an adult; the apparently unshakable self-confidence that was impossible to reconcile with his appearance. It commanded Marshall’s attention against his will.

It also made him curious.

“What’s your price?” he asked.

“What do you mean, price? I’m offering you donations. Funding from legal sources, provided in a legal manner.”

“I don’t doubt it. But I asked you what the price is for your donation. What do you want for your money?”

The stranger observed Marshall for a few brief moments. “You’re a clever man, Mr. Marshall,” he said at last. “You *are* the right one.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Nothing you wouldn’t do anyway. The shelter is a refuge for children who have nowhere safe to go. That’s all I want from you: a refuge every once in a while.”

Marshall tried to imagine this hunched old man staying at the shelter. He couldn’t quite picture it. “A refuge for *you*?”

“No, no, don’t worry. I have other options,” he laughed. “If you take me up on my offer, and I dearly hope you will, I’ll send people to you every once in a while. Children, young people, not much different from those you have here already. They’ll stay for a few weeks, some of them perhaps long term. Occasionally, they might

be adults. You can present those as interns or volunteers."

"What kind of people are they? Criminals? Illegal immigrants?"

"Neither. Simply people close to my heart who need a place where they'll be safe. Where they can find themselves and grow."

If what the man said was true, he wasn't demanding much. Such guests wouldn't particularly stand out.

"The shelter's fully occupied," Marshall argued. "I can't throw any of my kids out on the street for you."

"I would never dream of asking that. My financial support would of course be enough for you to expand. During the tour I happened to notice that the eastern side of the building would be ideally suited to an extension..."

Before Marshall realized it, they had almost completed a full circuit of the neighborhood. A little farther along stood the shelter, the only house on the street that wasn't a ruin.

"Take some time to mull it over," the old man offered. "I know it's a big decision. It demands proper consideration."

He took his wallet out of his pocket, withdrew a card from it, and pushed it into Marshall's hand. A business card. Marshall knew about these from his years at the bank. Some of the older or more eccentric people still used them.

"Homer G. Adams," he read. "CEO, General Cosmic Company." Neither the name nor the company rang a bell.

A car pulled up beside them; a big, imposing Mercedes. A uniformed chauffeur leaped out and opened the rear door for the hunched man.

"I'd be thrilled if we could come to an agreement, Mr. Marshall!" His visitor got into the car. The chauffeur shut the door and slid back into the driver's seat without so much as a glance at Marshall, then drove off.

Marshall watched the Mercedes leave and wondered if he had merely imagined this bizarre encounter, right up until the Mercedes had passed the shelter.

Just then, a patrol car rolled up and stopped in front of the building. A police officer climbed out and started up the steps to the shelter's entrance.

John Marshall hurriedly put the business card away and ran towards her as fast as he could.

11.

“My name is Crest da Zoltral.” The alien was waiting for them by the inner hatch of the airlock. “I am an Arkonide. In your terms, I’d describe myself as the scientific leader of this expedition.”

Crest da Zoltral’s voice was resonant and matter-of-fact; it reminded Rhodan of a news anchor. The alien resembled a human to such a degree that he briefly felt a touch of disappointment. Their host was a tall, skinny man with a high forehead and platinum blond hair. His skin was equally pale, and smooth. It didn’t seem to match the deep lines that had entrenched themselves on his face.

But those were all minor details. What stood out were his large eyes. They were red, like a flash effect on a photo that hadn’t been retouched. There was also a gleam in them that Rhodan interpreted as curiosity.

This curiosity, he discerned, could be their salvation.

Crest da Zoltral wore pants, a shirt, and a light jacket. The warmth of the ship—Rhodan’s temperature sensor showed a reading of 23.4 degrees C—suggested the jacket was worn more out of habit than necessity. On his feet, the alien wore thin, flexible shoes reminiscent of gym sneakers. Overall, he seemed to be dressed in light clothing that was well-suited to the perfectly crafted artificial environment.

Rhodan imagined what would happen if this alien was smuggled into a crowd of people on Earth. Into a football stadium, a Manhattan subway during rush hour, or a service at one of the many megachurches back home. He would have blended in effortlessly. No one would have been bothered by any aspect of him—his clothes, his appearance, even his eyes. Those would simply have been taken as the harmless idiosyncrasies of an old man who believed, for whatever reason, that he had to change his eye color using contact lenses. Or it would have been assumed to be a health condition.

No, Crest da Zoltral could have passed as a human...and yet. It

took Rhodan a few moments to pin down the source of his unease. The alien brought to mind a promotional tour through Africa that NASA had sent him and Bull on years ago. The idea had been to generate goodwill for the US by presenting space flight as a unifying force that brought people together. In Mozambique, they'd been welcomed with a grand reception, and one of the waiters had caught Rhodan's attention. Something about the man had been disconcerting. He was white, which wasn't common in the region, although not unheard of. However, he didn't act like the other transplants they had met there. Rhodan had secretly observed him for the duration of the evening, trying in vain to figure out what was so intriguing about this one individual.

Eventually, Bull had come over, shoved a glass into his hand, clapped him on the shoulder so hard that it spilled the champagne, and said, "What are you gawking at, Perry? Don't tell me you've never seen an albino before."

In that moment, Rhodan had understood his own fascination. The man's demeanor, his mannerisms, had echoed those of the community they were visiting, while his appearance was that of an outsider. He was a walking contradiction. That was why Rhodan's attention had lingered on him, why he'd found him so unique.

It was no different with the alien who stood before them. He had something human about him, something all too human, but equally, there was a foreignness there that he couldn't quite grasp.

Minutes passed. Crest da Zoltral didn't seem to mind that the humans didn't answer him. He looked composed, as if he'd already stood face to face with aliens many times before—and plenty of them must have been stranger than anything Rhodan's imagination could dream up.

Their host was happy to wait.

Reginald Bull, not so much.

Bull shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. Rhodan knew what that meant. His friend was poised to snarl at their new acquaintance.

He rested a hand on Bull's arm and spoke to Crest da Zoltral in a tone that he hoped wouldn't betray his deep sense of awe. "We're grateful for your kindness in rescuing us. That said, it wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't put us in danger in the first place."

The alien made no attempt to deny this. "I regret that you and your companions had to be inconvenienced. It was unavoidable."

Rhodan sensed that he was telling the truth. The fact that his ship had caused the *Stardust* to crash and sentenced its crew to death was uncomfortable for him—but no more than that. His regret was faint, like that of a human after realizing he'd just stepped on a snake.

"How exactly was it unavoidable to sentence us to an agonizing death by suffocation?"

"Your presence interfered with our affairs."

"Same as the moon bases, right? You destroyed them."

"We eliminated the technical installations that were incompatible with our interests."

"What interests? What did those people do to you? What did me and my crew do?"

"Nothing, in the strictest sense." Crest didn't allow Rhodan's admonishments to rattle him. "But you would have revealed our presence to the human race. The consequences would have been incalculable. Compared to that, a few dozen lives are a small price."

"So you say. What makes you so certain? What do you know about us humans? What do you know about the value of a human life?"

"I know enough. We've had the opportunity to spend a few weeks of your time observing mankind. We observed the low value you ascribe to the lives of other humans. Every day, many thousands on Earth die unnecessarily. They could be saved, if only humanity decided to do so."

He fell silent for a moment, as if to give Rhodan and Bull the chance to contradict him. When they didn't, he continued. "In addition, we draw on our own experience. Over the millennia, the ships of the Grand Imperium have visited countless worlds. A not insignificant number of these worlds featured intelligent life. Most of them were primitive civilizations, often more primitive than yours. In the early days of the Imperium, many tragedies occurred when our crews made contact with these civilizations. Confronted with the impossibly superior Arkonide culture, they died out before long. I believe you've had similar experiences in your own history. The indigenous cultures of the North American continent were wiped out in the face of the immigrants' superior technology, no?"

Again, Crest waited in vain for an answer.

"Due to this experience, our ships are subject to strict regulations," he continued. "Contact with civilizations below level

IV is prohibited. And I must make you aware that even when viewed in the most generous light, humanity qualifies as level III at best."

"You underestimate us," Rhodan objected. "And I wish to inform you that you have illegally entered human territory. This is our solar system, the Earth is our home planet, and the Moon belongs to us. No one invited you here!"

Did the Arkonides even understand the concepts of property and territory?

They did. Crest da Zoltral's golden red eyes widened in disbelief. "You dispute our right to be here, human?"

"Correct."

Their host fell silent. Rhodan tried to read the features, the eyes, of the alien. He believed he saw astonishment there, followed by indignation, which finally formed into what Rhodan desperately hoped was akin to burgeoning respect.

"Let's assume for a moment that you're right," said Rhodan when the alien remained silent. "That we're the savages you take us for. Our technology is primitive, our societies are barbaric, we're dirty and stinking in our space suits that smell of sweat and reprocessed excrement. Let's say that's all true. It makes me wonder...what are you doing here? Why did you come to our solar system? What are you looking for? What's so appealing about us barbarians and this lump of rock? We must have something you want, right?"

Tears welled in the Arkonide's eyes as Rhodan spoke. Crest da Zoltral defensively lifted a thin, almost emaciated hand and opened his mouth ready to object.

Rhodan didn't let him. "Or am I way off? Were you brought here instead by pure happenstance? Or should I say, by accident?" He pointed over his shoulder. "I may only be a primitive savage, but I have working eyes and a working brain. I've seen the edge of the crater. Your ship shaved off a large chunk of it during the landing. The *emergency* landing." He smiled. "You may consider yourselves vastly superior to us, but that's not true at the moment, is it? You're in the exact same position as me and my crew. You're stuck here!"

Crest da Zoltral jerked up and raised both his hands as if he wanted to strike the humans for their insolence. However, he didn't follow through. His arms froze in mid-air, then sank wearily to his

sides again.

In the end, he simply said, “Come. You humans must be curious about our ship.”

An hour later, Reginald Bull was practically foaming at the mouth. Rhodan knew his friend as a man obsessed with gadgetry. Bull loved whatever was newest and most expensive—and sometimes most useless—whether it was an electric speedster produced in North Korea that could go from zero to a hundred in three seconds, a new pod that finally allowed for true unified messaging, or a remote-controlled mini helicopter to liven up the few reluctant hours that he spent in his office.

Bull always played with his latest purchase obsessively until something newer and pricier caught his eye. He would lose interest in his current toy in an instant, giving it away to a friend or acquaintance or, if neither was on hand, a stranger. This was one of the traits that made him so popular but also one that gave him an air of eccentricity and often led to him being underestimated.

The Arkonides’ starship was a fantasy come true. An impossible utopia full of boundless possibilities. Crest da Zoltral exposed it all to them with an openness that astounded Rhodan.

Some robots approached. They looked like strong, idealized Arkonides. Their glistening skin betrayed their metallic makeup, but their movements were as fluid as those of living beings.

They took both men’s space suits. The touch of their steel fingers was soft. Rhodan and Bull offered no resistance; in the Arkonide ship, the suits with their heavy supply packs were only a hindrance.

Their Arkonide guide got onto a kind of robotic chair and glided forward. The vehicle hovered silently above the floor at knee height.

Hovered.

There was no way in hell that Bull would let himself be tricked by an optical illusion, so he pretended to trip over his own feet and rolled under the chair with a groaning cry. He succeeded in his efforts. Neither hidden wheels or chains, nor any other mechanism, held the robotic chair aloft.

“An anti-grav field,” explained Crest da Zoltral once Bull was back on his feet, his crew cut sticking up at right angles as if he’d seen a ghost. “We’ve mastered the ability to bend gravity to our

will, as I'm sure you already realized from the gravitational pull present all throughout our ship. If you had asked me, you could have spared yourself that performance. I'd have gladly shared the information." Crest da Zoltral flashed an approving smile. Even the alien wasn't immune to the charms of Bull and his hands-on approach. "You'll have the chance to experience anti-gravity on a larger scale shortly."

The robotic chair glided along the passageway, soon stopping before a circular hole in the floor. Rhodan estimated a diameter of at least four meters. He walked up to the edge and looked down. The hole was connected to a duct that appeared to lead all the way to the bowels of the ship. Like the rest of the ship, it was brightly lit, and—as with the rest of the ship—he couldn't tell where the light was coming from. It was just *there*.

Rhodan lifted his head and saw that the duct continued up through the ceiling, stretching so far that its end point was lost in the haze of the omnipresent light.

"An anti-grav lift, right?" Bull commented, having stepped up beside him. "It runs through the whole ship."

"Well recognized," said Crest da Zoltral. He steered his hover chair into the duct, and the anti-grav field promptly carried him and it upwards.

Rhodan fought back his fear of stepping into the abyss and followed suit. He felt himself being gently lifted up, as if a benevolent hand were holding him tight. Next to him, Bull whooped for joy like a kid who'd discovered a new, faster slope for his sled as the anti-grav field swept them away.

This was only the beginning of the wonders that awaited them.

Crest da Zoltral led them into a vast hall that held a dozen massive engine blocks. "Fusion reactors," the Arkonide explained. "The *Aetron* has twenty-seven of them. Together, they yield enough electricity to power the entire east coast of the United States."

Bull stopped in front of one of the blocks. He hummed quietly, stretched out a hand and reverently ran it over the metal. "Fusion reactors," he whispered. "They've been working on these for half a century back on Earth without getting a single step closer. A lot of scientists doubt the technology's even possible."

"As you can see, it's possible," came the Arkonide's straightforward reply.

Bull turned to Rhodan. "Imagine, Perry. If we had just one of

these reactors…"

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Rhodan nodded. The Arkonides had a source of power at their disposal that was unlimited, clean, and safe. The Earth was suffering from an energy crisis that seemed inescapable.

Next, Crest da Zoltral showed them the enormous propulsion units in the ship's equatorial ring. "Their thrust is sufficient for the *Aetron* to reach light speed within ten minutes of your time." Bull blinked nervously when he heard this figure. The *Stardust* needed days to reach even a fraction of the speed of light. "Save a little of your amazement for later," the alien advised; Bull's reaction hadn't escaped his notice. "These are only the sublight drives."

The Arkonide led them to the *real* spacedrive. It was housed in an expansive chamber that Rhodan mentally placed in the lower half of the sphere. Crest called it the "transition drive," and it reminded Rhodan of a giant onion that had been sliced in half and turned upside-down.

"It's based on five-dimensional technology," their host explained. "The transition allows us to jump through hyperspace instantaneously."

"Over what distance?" asked the practically minded Bull.

"Several hundred light-years."

"Range of operation?"

"Several thousand."

Bull whistled softly. "How high is its energy expenditure?"

The Arkonide, evidently no stranger to pride, answered him eagerly, and an almost friendly dialogue about space travel arose between the two.

Rhodan only half paid attention. He was happy for Bull to take over the human-alien relations. It allowed him to stay in the background and try to process what he had seen.

The Arkonides' technology was incredible. It appeared to have no limits. Their ship was capable of crossing the entire Milky Way—provided Crest was telling the truth, of course, and Rhodan saw no reason to doubt him.

And yet, something wasn't quite right about this ship. It was a sphere with a diameter of almost five hundred meters. The Arkonide had shown them only a fraction of its enormous volume. What was hiding in the rest? And where were the other crew members? The place was as lively as a graveyard. They had yet to

encounter a single resident other than Crest da Zoltral. Perhaps this was by design, as a move to carefully help the primitive newcomers process the initial shock of first contact. Or perhaps there was no crew at all. If there was, did they just have better things to do than say hello to a pair of pesky savages?

All of these guesses were plausible enough, but Rhodan had good reason to believe that none of them were correct. The reason for that was the stench. On board the *Aetron*, it smelled of mold, of decay, of old sweat, even of fried electronics. None of that fit with the perfection of the Arkonide technology they had seen.

When they finally left the spacedrive chamber, Rhodan said, "Can I ask you a question, Crest da Zoltral?" And before the Arkonide could respond, he continued, "Your ship is very impressive. Like something out of a fairy tale, honestly. But I'd expected your magical wonderland to have a few more inhabitants. Where's the crew?"

Crest da Zoltral examined him for a while, his red eyes alert. "It's hard to get anything past you, isn't it?" This was not an accusation; it was a compliment. "You're so insatiable. So curious..." He straightened up. "Ask and you shall receive. Follow me!"

He led them towards the center of the ship. A bulky hatch slid aside to reveal a domed hall.

"The control center," he explained as they stepped inside.

Rhodan was reminded of a planetarium. The entire ceiling was made up of one enormous screen. It depicted the stars and, amid the endless expanse, a multicolored ball that was Earth, the home that Rhodan wasn't sure he'd ever see again. All this was depicted in three dimensions, and with such sharpness and clarity that they could have been standing out on the Moon and staring up into space.

"And here you have our crew!"

Resentment echoed in Crest da Zoltral's voice.

There were two dozen Arkonides, men and women. All were younger than their guide but had the same white hair and red eyes. That was where the similarities ended, though. Crest was an old man, but he had retained his zest for life. None of the other Arkonides even looked at the two strangers.

They lay flaccidly on floating loungers among the consoles spread across the control center. Their wide belts held handguns of

some sort, but these people didn't look threatening. Rhodan doubted they could have stood up by themselves even if they'd wanted to...not that the idea seemed to occur to any of them.

The Arkonides' gazes were focused firmly on the clouds of light that floated above their heads, rapidly changing into different shapes and colors.

"What are they doing?" Rhodan asked. "What do those lights mean?"

Crest met his eyes almost with embarrassment. "I can answer the first question for you. My fellow Arkonides are playing so-called 'fiction games.' That's all they do. As for the second question: I don't know. For me, they're nothing but will-o'-the-wisps. You'd have to ask one of them," he said, gesturing to a portly crewmate lying only a few steps away, "if you'd like an answer to that. Honestly, though, I doubt he'd be able to give you one."

Bull drew up next to Rhodan and said quietly, "Now I understand, Perry. That's why they crash-landed. These guys were too busy with their games to fly their own ship."

Crest sought eye contact with Bull. "You don't need to whisper. I'm all too familiar with the bitter truth."

Bull shook his head. "But that's crazy! How can they—"

He didn't make it any further. A female voice suddenly said acerbically, "What are these animals doing on my ship?"

12.

"Mercant, you disgusting old bootlicker of the profiteering capitalist bourgeoisie! To what do I owe the dubious honor of your call?"

A gaunt, pale face loomed on the monitor before Allan Mercant. It belonged to Yuri Medvenkov. *Count* Yuri Medvenkov, and thus a member of the new Great Russian aristocracy.

Paleness was emblematic of these aristocrats, but it also highlighted the nature of the connection that Mercant had established. The picture was grainy and in black and white. When the man's mouth moved, it left artifacts in the image, making him look like a half-finished animation. But impressions could be deceiving. The man was real, and the artifacts were a consequence of the multiple layers of encryption and the distribution of the signal across hundreds of randomly chosen servers.

Caution was advisable when speaking with Great Russia, and the utmost caution if speaking as one traitor to another.

"You'll find out soon enough, you pompous pencil-pusher!" Mercant replied, unruffled. He'd known Medvenkov for more than twenty years, and in that time he'd learned what the Russian valued in him. What he needed from his enemy, this lackey of the villainous organization known as Homeland Security, was disrespect. That was something the count lacked in his everyday life. Sniveling respect was routine for him, as were the vicious schemes carried out under cover of that same politeness.

"Let me guess. You're finally ready to defect? You want to live out your days in a civilized country?" Medvenkov laughed as if he'd just told the joke of the century.

"What do you have to offer me beyond a *dacha* that'll sink into the melting permafrost quicker than I can drown myself in vodka? Or your comrades in the FSB can shoot me as a capitalist dog?"

Medvenkov abruptly grew serious. "There are worse deaths than a quick, merciful bullet, my exploitative arch-capitalist friend," he stated, his face even more pallid than usual.

“You may be right for once, Agent Medvenkov.” Mercant hunched over the keyboard and typed in a command followed by a password. “One moment, please.”

The monitor divided itself and a second face materialized. This one was round and belonged to an Asian man. Even in grayscale, Mercant thought he could make out a healthy tan.

“Ah, comrade Li De!” said the Russian. “I should have expected another family reunion.”

Li De bowed and smiled. “What can I do for you two fine gentlemen?”

“Save your smiles,” said Medvenkov. “No one’s buying it.”

“Smile and the world smiles with you,” the Asian man replied.

“Or wipes it off your smug face. I should have dealt with you in Geneva, comrade!”

“I’d have beaten you to the punch, you blue-blooded pansy!” Li De replied, grinning more broadly.

“Enough!” said Mercant. “Don’t forget that I’d have gotten the drop on you both. I could have taken you out with ease. And I didn’t.”

The pair fell silent and stared at him defiantly. They didn’t like being reminded of this uncomfortable fact. No, Mercant hadn’t done what Homeland Security had demanded of him back then. Instead of eliminating the two diplomats who had been correctly deemed to be agents, he’d drunk himself into a stupor with them in his hotel room in Geneva, only to find out that both of them had received identical orders from their respective bureaus. But by that time, it was already too late. They’d had a few drinks together and seen the humanity in their counterparts. More than that, they’d found kindred spirits. Agents, one and all. They knew each others’ pain, their loneliness, their boundless hope of serving a larger whole that was worth their service. And the futility of their efforts.

An instinct that Mercant couldn’t have explained to this day had told him that he would find brothers in these two men.

“But I promise you one thing,” he continued. “If you don’t stop this childish bickering right now, I’ll disable the encryption on our channel. Got it?”

Medvenkov and Li De nodded. The Russian did it in the sweeping manner common to the new Russian aristocracy, while Li De accompanied his with a curt bow. They knew Mercant well enough to recognize that the American wouldn’t hesitate to make

good on his threat. They also knew their own secret service agencies well enough to realize that the remainder of their lives would be measured in hours.

"What do you want?" they asked in unison.

"Contact with the *Stardust* has been lost," said Mercant. "The ship has gone missing on the far side of the moon."

"And?" Medvenkov replied. "You Americans have only yourselves to blame. Taking a badly designed deathtrap like the Nova and mounting a—well, at least *somewhat* modern space craft on its tip, then trying to send it to the Moon. How did such a harebrained scheme ever come about?"

"Sheer desperation." He paid no mind to the Russian's derision. He'd developed enough familiarity with Medvenkov over the years to learn that his biting comments were just a mask he used to keep the hardships of life at arm's length. If Medvenkov had been born only ten years earlier, it would have been in a camp in Siberia, where his noble family had been sent. He wouldn't have survived. Infants had no chance in the camps. But luck—or fate—had determined that he would enter the world in the early seventies.

In the interim period, as Cold War tensions thawed, Medvenkov had survived. And when the Soviet Union had turned into the battered and broken Russia, and then finally the proud Great Russia, he'd been pulled along in the wake of their ascent.

Medvenkov had gone far in the FSB, but not far enough to have ever forgotten that he owed his existence to the lucky coincidence of his birthdate. Or that a better existence had to be out there somewhere, somehow, sometime.

"The *Stardust* managed its flight to the Moon all the same, my aristocratic friend," answered Mercant. "In contrast, well-informed sources indicate that two days before the *Stardust*'s launch, a fierce explosion occurred in the Caucasus. Seismic data points to Baikonur as the center of the tremor, which just happens to be the location of the largest Russian spaceport."

Medvenkov shrugged. "The road to glory is paved with sacrifices. I'm sure you know well and good, capitalist dog, that a successful launch from Baikonur followed the very next day."

Li De laughed softly at the Russian's words. Mercant turned to him. "I'm afraid you have just as little reason to be laughing. The same knowledgeable sources informed me that a Chinese rocket with six taikonauts entered an orbit around the moon...and then

never returned from the dark side."

The man's smile froze but didn't disappear. "And?" he asked. "What's that supposed to prove? You Americans have lost a few men, the Russians have too, and so have we. What difference does it make?"

Li De's face grew larger as he learned forward and thus closer to the camera. "Mercant, I've known you for many years. You've always been well informed. You've often passed on your knowledge to both me and our aristocratic friend. You've never lied to us. That's more than I can say about the men and women I call my comrades. You know what's brewing in the minds of the military leaders. You know the atrocities they're hatching. And in these all-important hours, when millions or even billions of lives hang in the balance, you've contacted us to talk about the fates of a dozen people?"

Mercant nodded slowly. "Yes."

"They don't mean a thing."

"I disagree. They mean everything. At least, there's a chance they do."

"You'll have to explain that to us," Li De demanded.

"Gladly. Imagine one of the rockets returns," said Mercant, directing his words to both of them. "The American, Russian, or Chinese one. It doesn't matter which. Just imagine it."

"What's to imagine? A handful of astronauts come back to Earth. No one would take any real notice."

"Ah, but they'd be no ordinary astronauts," Mercant countered. "If a rocket comes back, it'll return with the first humans who have ever made contact with alien life."

"Where did you get this idea?" The question came from Medvenkov. The Russian had now leaned forward as well.

"There's no other explanation." Mercant shrugged. "Com links with every nation's lunar bases were cut off all at once. That can't be a coincidence. Someone must have destroyed the bases, or at least their com units. An accident or natural disaster can be ruled out since the bases are too far apart for that to cause a simultaneous breakdown. That leaves only one explanation: there's someone or something up there on the Moon who doesn't give a crap about the way we divide up humanity into nations. All humans are classified as the enemy, or at least as a thorn in their side. And whoever they are, they clearly have the means to put their views into practice."

“Mercant, that’s one possible line of reasoning, but—”

“No buts. Do either of you have a better explanation?”

Silence.

“So, what do you suppose would happen if a rocket came back with aliens on board?”

“That depends on which one comes back,” said Li De. “Your capitalist toy would be knocked out of the sky by our defenses quicker than you can say ‘Tiananmen Square.’” He turned his head to the side towards Medvenkov. “The same goes for your bucket of czarist, aristocratic tin!”

“Just the sort of lowbrow remark I’d expect from you, comrade,” the Russian replied. “But I must inform you that your rocket would have no luck against our defenses, either. The less said about the flying product of capitalist exploitation, the better, of course.”

Mercant didn’t take the bait. “I assure you that the American defenses wouldn’t slack off, either. We all know our superior officers, don’t we? They’re all cut from the same cloth. Putting their distinct lack of imagination aside, they’d soon realize that the ultimate weapon was fast approaching Earth, and that would be enough. Whichever team makes it back would have met the aliens and successfully made peaceful contact. Aliens who possess technology that must seem like pure magic to us. The team would bring their technology back home, having perhaps even managed to form an alliance with them. Whatever the particulars, none of the great powers would be able to stand knowing that a rival had secured access to these unimaginable resources.”

Mercant paused and looked at the two men’s faces. Both of them should really have been his enemies. They’d both once planned to kill him. He hadn’t seen either of them in person for years, but often they still seemed like the two people closest to him on the entire planet.

How much could he expect from them? Once, in a hotel room in Geneva, they’d crossed a boundary. Would he achieve that again now, when so much more was at stake than the lives of a few easily replaced low-level agents?

“None of the lunar rockets will successfully return to the Earth,” Mercant continued slowly. “If they try, they’ll be destroyed by one of the great powers. You know what that means.”

Both men simply uttered a single word: “War.”

“Exactly. None of the great powers on this planet will stand for having the spoils they thought were theirs torn from their grasp. So they’ll lash out. That means war. Nuclear war.” Was Mercant imagining things, or had Li De turned pale now as well? “And,” he continued, “what would it mean if one of the rockets did break through the defenses and returned to its homeland?”

“War.”

“Exactly. And if one nation managed to take possession of another nation’s rocket?”

“War.”

“Right you are.”

Mercant didn’t add any further questions. It was time for these enemies-turned-partners to ask a question of their own.

They did so.

“What can we do?” they said in unison.

Mercant told them.

13.

“Thora!” Crest spun around and looked at the woman who had entered the Arkonide ship’s control center. “You’ll—”

“I asked you what these animals are doing on my ship!” the woman repeated.

An Arkonide like Crest but far younger, she was almost as tall as Rhodan (himself a tall man) and athletic. She had long, white hair. Her skin was pale, making her full lips and golden red eyes stand out from her face.

Those eyes were currently burning with rage.

“I invited them on board out of...” Crest hesitated. “I felt...sympathy for them.”

Thora’s eyes widened. “Your sympathy is misguided, Crest. You know that as well as I do. All you’re doing is torturing these animals unnecessarily.” Her English was every bit as perfect as her crewmate’s.

It was too much for Bull. Rhodan tried to hold him back, but he pushed past and bellowed, “You listen here! We’re humans, you got that? We’re not animals! We’re...”

Thora didn’t dignify Bull with a glance. “Now do you see what your misplaced sympathy leads to, Crest?”

The old man tensed up. “Thora, I assure you that—”

“Enough!” she interrupted. “Not in front of the animals!”

She raised a hand and waved it commandingly. Robots approached in large steps and quickly surrounded Rhodan and Bull. They were humanoid in shape, but their arms ended in weapon muzzles.

“Robots!” Thora ordered. “Take these animals away!”

The robots locked them up.

From the look of things, their “cell” had been improvised; it was likely an Arkonide’s cabin. Rhodan judged its area to be about sixteen square meters. Only a rough estimate was possible as the walls were curved without a corner in sight.

Bull took the cabin as a cage, and, like a tiger in a cage, he made a spectacle of himself.

"Who does that Thora think she is?" he roared. "Animals? Pah!"

He huffed and puffed until his face turned so red that it could hardly be distinguished from his crew cut. He stomped about, and he knocked on, pounded, and rammed against the door.

To Rhodan, the door looked like a hatch that would offer protection during sudden drops in pressure and was thus designed to withstand many times the force that even a particularly outraged Reginald Bull could muster. He could also have suggested to Bull that he was living up to Thora's every expectation, but he kept that to himself.

Instead, he made himself comfortable on the bed that had silently slid out from the wall when he'd gone to settle down on the floor. The bed had neither a mattress nor blanket, but Rhodan felt snug and secure in a way that was as wonderful as it was inexplicable. He suspected he could credit one of the Arkonides' invisible energy fields.

"You'll never get the door open like that," he eventually told his friend.

Bull, who had just backed up to the other side of the cabin for a running start, snorted. "Says you!" He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. "That woman, Thora, wants our heads. At least I'm trying to do *something*. You're just lazing around on the bed, happy to sit back and stare at the Arkonides' fancy photo wallpaper!" He jerked a thumb to the left, where the cabin appeared to smoothly transition into parkland.

"I'm saving my energy," Rhodan replied. "Learning plenty about the Arkonides too."

"Oh, you are, are you? Feel free to share with the class."

"Gladly, my friend. They're not as different from us as they like to imagine."

"Based on what?"

"For starters, take a look at this hologram. A park is a deeply human concept. Universally human. On Earth, there aren't any cultures that don't have parks—assuming the culture's prosperity allows for more than pure survival. In a certain sense, parks are victory trophies. Man has defeated nature, so now he takes pleasure in its tame, harmless form."

"All right, fine, the Arkonides like parks," Bull conceded,

slightly lost as to the point of Rhodan's observation. "So? How does that help?"

"We can understand them better. They're a lot like us. Not only in that regard either. I know you were busy raging, but did you get a look at the endless shipyards and factories this hologram showed us earlier?"

Bull nodded. "Industrial zones. Gigantic ones, practically the size of a planet. Which tells us what, exactly?"

"That even if their technology seems wondrous to us, it isn't magic. Arkonide ships like this one aren't built with a snap of a finger. They're the product of years, maybe millennia of experience. Of specialists, of expert logistics, and ultimately of blood, sweat, and tears. And the Arkonides keep that sweaty unpleasantness out of sight and out of mind in the same way we do: they build industrial zones and put them far away from their homes."

As if the holo-wall had been waiting for Rhodan to say the magic word, the image changed to show a rolling hillscape strewn with lakes. On the shores of the lakes, strange flower-like buildings rose into the sky on stalks hundreds of meters tall.

"Now we know their secret," Bull observed, pointing to the dwellings. "These Arkonides are such boneheads that they live in funnels balanced upside-down."

Rhodan allowed himself a smirk then shook his head. "Or maybe these Arkonides—or their ancestors, at least—were so proud and defiant that they weren't going to bow to the laws of gravity and statistics. The very thought of it was an unacceptable affront."

"Maybe," Bull allowed, "but..."

"That's not the most important point. This, right here, explains all of Thora's disdain for us!"

"It does?" Bull squinted at the image.

"Yup. Haven't you noticed how each of the funnel houses stands alone? There are no settlements here, no community that extends beyond each individual building. If you ask me, the Arkonides are deeply divided, status-conscious beyond all measure, and preoccupied with class and rank."

Bull pondered that for a moment and slowly nodded. "Okay, so maybe you have Thora all figured out. But how do you explain those wimps staring up at their light clouds and—" Bull didn't reach the end of his sentence. The holographic image exploded in a cascade of light. Silence reigned for a moment, then he whispered,

“Holy shit! What the hell’s...”

He took a step back and slid into a cross-legged position on the floor. Another explosion of light accompanied his movements. It looked to Rhodan as though the light thought it was greeting a friend. If so, it worked on a reciprocal basis. Bull blinked; light patterns responded. Bull whispered; light patterns responded. Bull clicked his tongue—and light flooded the cabin.

New beads of sweat formed on the man’s forehead and clung like dewdrops to the tips of his bristly hair. His breathing grew faster and shallower. He wheezed, and his upper body started frantically bending forwards and backwards. His eyes lost focus. The pupils wandered frenetically—in sync with the lights, it seemed to Rhodan. Finally, the astronaut groaned as the tension drained from his upper body, and he collapsed onto his back.

The lights vanished.

“Perry!” Bull whispered. “These guys aren’t as apathetic as they look. They’re playing in some kind of tournament.”

“Over the ship’s network?”

“Yeah. But it’s not a computer game like we know them. It’s...it’s... I can’t explain it in words. There are no points or anything, no high scores, no puzzles to solve, no goals to be reached.”

“What’s it about, then?”

“It’s about...beauty.” Bull wore a glazed, wistful expression as he spoke. “These Arkonides are immersed in their own separate world. And I could understand it.” He paused and shook himself off. “A little, anyway. But sadly not enough.”

His distant gaze returned to the here and now, and he turned towards Rhodan. “Perry, I’d hoped I’d be able to break through somehow. Figure out a way into their onboard network. Find some kind of weak point, a node with lax security, a forgotten tertiary computer... Something.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Nope. Either I’m too dumb, or their technology is just too alien. It’s not happening.” He leaned on both hands and pushed himself up. “That’s fine, though. I guess we’ll have to deal with them the old-fashioned way.”

He raised both arms and fiddled with the collar of his shirt. A few moments later, he’d found what he was looking for. Clinging to his fingers was a pale substance reminiscent of raw pastry dough.

Rhodan stood up. “What is that?” he asked, although he already knew the answer.

“C-4. Plastic explosive.”

“How did it get here?”

“What, jealous that you’re not the only one with some clever ideas?” Bull shoved the whole lump into his left hand then grabbed his collar again with his right. “Private cargo. Every NASA astronaut has an allowance of two kilos to use as they see fit, provided they don’t bring any materials on board that could endanger the mission. Manoli dragged some ancient science fiction magazine along with him. I went for something a little more practical.”

Bull’s right hand reappeared. He held something in it that looked like a cartridge. “C-4 is about as explosive as shortcrust pastry. You can slam it against a wall and nothing’ll happen. It only reacts if you apply sufficient pressure and heat. For example, if a spacecraft is exploding anyway—or if an old astronaut who just might know a thing or two happens to have a detonator in his pocket.” He lifted up the cartridge. “Like this one right here.”

“I asked you how it got here!”

“Oh, I have a few friends among the ground crew who were willing to turn a blind eye. And our super-duper oh-so-smart alien friends clearly thought we were too primitive to bother taking seriously. They think they can lock us away in some cabin, and we’ll just wait here like good little boys until they decide how to dispose of us. Too bad for them.”

He moved past Rhodan to the door and started spreading the explosive along the barely visible gap at head height.

“You’re going to blow us sky-high!”

“Maybe. But that bed there should protect us. I bet it’s made of an energy field along the same lines as the defensive shield surrounding the ship. We’ll crawl under and hang our hopes on the Arkonides’ workmanship.”

“That door’s a product of Arkonide workmanship too. It’s a hatch. They tend to be pretty robust.”

Bull didn’t allow himself to be deterred. “It’s a moving part, and moving parts are always more fragile. That’s true everywhere in the universe, aliens or no aliens.” He carried on spreading the explosive.

“Fine, let’s say you blow up this hatch. What then?”

“We steal the weapons from two of those geeks. They’re so absorbed in their game that they won’t even notice.”

“You have no idea how they work!”

“Oh, yes I do. The Arkonides have mastered nuclear fusion. I’m willing to bet they’re advanced enough to house a mini power plant in their handguns. Either that or their storage technology has reached a point where they can store a shot that’ll really pack a punch inside the grip. My guess is the weapons discharge their energy thermally. The risk of leakage would be markedly lower compared to firing projectile weapons on board the ship.”

“Probably. But that doesn’t get you any closer to being able to handle one.”

“I think it does. It’s like you said, these guys aren’t as different from us as they like to think.” Bull paused his work and turned his head. “They have five fingers. Their weapons have a trigger. And the safety mechanism is probably comparable to the ones on Earth.”

“So you plan to shoot our way to freedom?” Rhodan walked towards his friend. “Reg, that’s suicide!”

“Better than waiting around for a death sentence. But don’t worry, Perry; I don’t actually have a death wish. We’ll take Crest or Thora hostage. Who’s going to stop us? Not those wusses stuck in fantasy land.”

He pulled one last piece of plastic explosive out of his collar and stuck it to the seam.

“You’re forgetting about the combat robots,” Rhodan countered. “Not to mention an act of violence would make an agreement with the Arkonides extremely difficult if not impossible.”

Bull stopped sticking the explosive to the seam and turned around. “Have you totally lost your mind? There is no agreement. It didn’t work. Think about the moon bases! Think about the *Stardust*! Think about Thora! She called us ‘animals.’ Remember what you yourself said about the Arkonides and their love of status. Thora won’t even lower herself to acknowledge us as thinking beings with a right to live. To her, we’re just nagging little insects. And she’ll deal with us accordingly.”

Rhodan took another step closer to his friend. “We haven’t even started trying to reach an understanding yet. Besides, I’m not talking about Thora but about Crest.”

“What does he matter? He’s an old man.”

“Exactly. He’s a man who’s accumulated tremendous

knowledge. Far more than he's shared with us so far."

"And why should he blab any more of that to us? Because we say 'pretty please'? Out of pity?"

"No. Because he wants to live. Crest is sick. He needs—"

A soft hissing sound cut him off. The hatch slid open to reveal Crest da Zoltral. Tears wet the Arkonide's eyes.

Quietly, he said, "I must ask you to come with me."

14.

"Stop! Hold on a minute!"

John Marshall reached the shelter in the nick of time. The police officer was standing on the topmost step and was about to ring the doorbell.

"You don't need to ring the bell! I'm out here!"

The officer lumbered around to face him. She was "solidly built," as he always referred to such people in front of the children. It didn't help, of course; the kids called it as they saw it: the woman was fat.

John knew her. "Deborah!" he called out, relieved. "What's wrong?"

"What are you doing out here in this heat, John?" The officer took off her hat and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Going for a walk."

"You're crazy."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he replied. "How can I help you?"

The officer descended the stairs to the sidewalk. She took each step carefully, one after the other, holding on tightly to the rusty handrail. It wobbled beneath her grip.

She wasn't the typical image of a policewoman—in more ways than one. Deborah was incorruptible. And compassionate. She had raised seven children as a solo effort while looking after a man who could only get through life with a bottle in his hand. She knew that children equaled chaos every single day. He could talk to her comfortably.

"One of your kids is wanted," she informed him. "Sid González."

"Sid?" What did the local police want with the boy? His little visit to the restricted area of Nevada Fields had already been settled, and it had nothing to do with the Greater Houston Police Department. There had to be a mistake; some kind of database mix-

up. “Sid’s one of my best kids. What’s he supposed to have done?”

“Bank robbery.”

“Bank robbery?” What the hell was going on? That wasn’t your everyday sort of chaos. “I… I… This has to be a mistake! Sid’s the most harmless kid you can imagine. He lives in his own world. He’d never even dream of stealing anything. And even if he did, he’s just a kid. One who has trouble tying his shoelaces. How could he ever rob a bank?”

“That’s exactly what we’re wondering. Let me show you something.”

Deborah strode to her patrol car. The tinted window on the driver’s side whirred as it rolled down to reveal another officer. The woman was Deborah’s partner. Young and thin. She wore body armor and a helmet, and her visor was down. The two were a mismatched team, but that was fully intentional; the Greater Houston Police Department had a preference for pairing opposites together. It helped to ensure that the compassionate ones like Deborah didn’t get too soft, and that the uncompromising ones like her partner didn’t constantly overreact.

John Marshall tried to snatch a glimpse of the woman’s face through her mirrored visor. One look was usually enough for him to get a sense of who he was dealing with. Enough to find the right words.

He didn’t succeed. Instead, he saw only his own reflection.

Marshall recoiled. He was pallid, his cheeks sunken. The worries and sleepless nights had dug deep furrows into his flesh.

Without a word, the driver passed Deborah a tablet. She was wearing gloves.

“Perhaps you’ll be able to make sense of this,” said Deborah as she swiped her fingers across the screen and brought up a video file. “Here! Take a look!”

She held out the tablet for him. An empty, austere room. Safe-deposit boxes lined the walls from floor to ceiling.

“This footage comes from a security camera in the Bank of America branch in Downtown Houston. The vault.”

A time display ran at the bottom right of the image. The recording was less than two hours old.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, all of a sudden, sparks flew, bathing the room in a dazzling white that obscured all other details. When the glow had faded, Sid was standing in the

vault. He didn't move for a moment; then, still crouched, he turned on his heel and looked around searchingly. It was as though he'd instantly arrived in the vault from somewhere else and now found himself in an unfamiliar environment. His shirt was drenched in sweat.

"Those sparks, that light... What was that?" Marshall asked.

"We're hoping to learn that from you. Or from Sid."

In his left hand, the boy held an empty plastic bag. He went to the wall of the vault to open one of the boxes, then stopped, stunned, when its door wouldn't budge. It was secured with its own lock. Sid shook himself off, as if he thought he was caught in a bad dream and wanted to break free. He tried a different box. No luck. He yanked at one more without success, then tried another with the same result. One after another he attempted to open them, only to fail every time. Finally, he just bounced to and fro, caught between disbelief and rage.

"Locked up tight," Deborah commented dryly. "He can rattle those safe-deposit boxes until he's blue in the face."

Sid paused for a moment and thought things over. Then all his disappointment turned to anger. He repeatedly kicked one of the boxes, ever faster, ever harder. He stopped only when a sound made him prick up his ears. Terrified, he spun around. His eyes widened.

Sparks flew.

And when they faded, the vault was empty. A few seconds later, three security guards ran in and stood there, confused.

Deborah stopped the video. "That's everything we have. The bank is plastered with cameras. Your kid didn't show up on any of the others. Not to mention the vault only has one entrance. The boy *was* inside the vault—that's confirmed not only by the video but by dozens of fingerprints and DNA samples that we found at the scene. There's no way Sid González could have gotten past the guards. But he did. Do you have an explanation for that?"

"No." Marshall thought back to Nevada Fields, to the launch of the *Stardust*. Sid had suddenly disappeared and found his way into a blocked-off area with no explanation. The last thing Marshall thought he'd seen before the vision had overcome him were sparks surrounding the boy.

He felt sick. His knees quivered. It was like the asphalt beneath his feet was no longer solid. No, worse—like everything he'd thought was true was no longer real.

“John, where is Sid González?” asked Deborah.

Sid, a bank robber? The boy had appeared inside a vault protected by multiple layers of security then escaped by vanishing again? It was impossible. It was too much.

“Deborah...can’t we just forget about this whole thing? Sid didn’t steal anything.”

“He tried to. He was just too dumb to pull it off.”

“Exactly. He’s a stupid kid. You know how boys are. Stupidity goes with the territory. Please, Deborah, let him go. I’ll talk to him. He’ll never, ever—”

“Deb?” a voice interrupted. The young officer in the patrol car. She had slid her visor up, revealing pretty blue eyes. Cold eyes. “Is this man being difficult? Should I call for backup?”

The older officer turned to her colleague. “No, that won’t be necessary. We’re almost there.” She turned back to Marshall, slowly shook her head, and said quietly, “I’m sorry, John. The video’s already on the police department’s servers. I can’t let your boy go free. You understand?”

Deborah had blue eyes as well. Marshall had never noticed before. Pretty blue eyes. Warm eyes. Deborah would have left Sid in peace if it were within her power.

“Yes, I understand,” he said, tensing. “I’ll go and get him for you, okay? It’s better if you stay outside. You know how police make the kids uncomfortable.”

Deborah hesitated. It was against regulations. Her partner was watching and might mention it in her report. Her compassion was stronger, however.

“All right, John. Fifteen minutes. That’s all I can give you.”

“Thanks! I’ll never forget it.”

John Marshall ran up the steps to the shelter.

Thirty children were waiting for him inside. They had crowded into the hallway and the wide, well-worn staircase almost up to the second floor.

Sue was right at the front. She jumped back when he opened the door. She had watched his chat with the police through the mail slot.

“What’s wrong?” she asked anxiously. “What do the cops want?”

Marshall looked at the expectant children. Large, fearful eyes

stared back at him. The kids had amassed too many bad experiences with the police. At the same time, there was hope in their gazes. They trusted that John had it all under control. He always found a way.

Thirty children. One was missing. Sid.

"They want Sid," Marshall replied.

"Why?"

"Because..." He deliberated. Sue and some of the others might have heard snatches of his conversation with Deborah. He had to be cautious. "As a witness. It's about a bank robbery."

"A bank robbery? How and when is Sid supposed to have witnessed a—"

Marshall cut her off. "Later. We don't have time for explanations right now. The police have a search warrant. I've wrangled fifteen minutes out of them to find Sid. Then they'll come into the shelter and drag him out."

Some of the children gasped; a girl high up on the staircase began to sob.

"Where is he?" Marshall asked.

No one offered an answer.

"He was at breakfast this morning," Sue said. "Then he went to his room, and I haven't seen him since."

"Was he in the workshop?"

"To hawk his space junk?" Sue didn't think too highly of Sid's favorite pastime. "No. Nevada must have done a number on his stomach. He hardly ate a thing. He's probably lying in bed and dreaming of aliens that'll abduct him and get him out of this madhouse."

Marshall ignored the sting in her words. Sue did seem oddly grown up at times, but she was still an ordinary child and thus always ready with a vicious comment about another kid.

"Anyone else?" he asked loudly. "Have any of you seen Sid since breakfast?"

They shook their heads.

"Fine. Then we'll search the whole house from top to bottom." Marshall turned to the twins, who were standing directly behind Sue. "Tyler, Damon, you man the exits to make sure he doesn't get away!"

The twins nodded. They didn't look at Marshall. They were afraid of the police just like all the others. With only one difference:

they hated them too.

"Get moving!" Marshall shouted. "What are you waiting for?"

The children jumped with a start and scurried up the stairs as if competing in a race. The twins hung back. Tyler went to the door; he kneeled before the mail slot, lifted the flap, and peered outside. His free hand was clasped around Saint Christopher. Damon went silently to the back door.

Marshall didn't feel comfortable leaving them alone. At the same time, he'd given them a job that would keep them away from the others and hopefully occupy them enough that they weren't tempted to do anything stupid.

A pointless job, though. However he managed it, Sid could do the impossible. He'd entered a restricted area of Nevada Fields and broken into and out of a bank vault. Who or what could actually stop him? Even if they did find him and manage to restrain him, what then? Marshall didn't have the slightest clue about what to do with Sid. Hand him over to the police?

Unthinkable. Texas law didn't mess around, even when it came to minors. Sid would go to prison for years. For an attempted bank robbery that he, John Marshall, was all but responsible for.

He shouldn't have offloaded his worries onto the boy. Sid was just a child. There was only one way he could have reacted to learning that the trust was having financial difficulties: by trying to rustle up some cash. And where did they have cash? In a bank, of course.

But Marshall's regret came too late. What was done was done. All he could do now was find Sid quickly and hope for a miracle. He clung to that thought. Yes, a miracle. Hadn't that man, Homer Adams, been a miracle who'd appeared out of nowhere? Maybe there was a perfectly simple explanation. So straightforward that they'd all overlooked it. Or Deborah would find some way to let Sid go free. The officer was resourceful; she was not to be underestimated.

The top floor was quickly scoured. There were only two rooms: Sid's and John's. They were empty. All that was left apart from that were the spaces under the sloping roof that they used for storage. Sue, who was so flexible that a snake would have curled up in envy, worked her way through the clutter. When she reappeared, her costume was dirty and had a tear around her arm stump. Sore, reddened skin poked through.

She didn't seem to have noticed. "He's not in here!" she panted.

The third floor. There were children everywhere, cleaning out the cupboards and crawling under the beds and into hidden corners.

No Sid.

Sue ran over to Marshall. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him down to her level. "John," she whispered in his ear. "Go to the window! And act natural!"

Marshall waited a moment before casually walking to the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out onto the street. A second patrol car had arrived. Deborah was standing by the driver's door and gesticulating with her meaty arms. Marshall was too far away to hear what she was saying, but he could sense what it was about. Deborah wanted to send the car away. She knew about the children's fear of law enforcement and was trying to keep the situation from escalating.

Sue stood beside Marshall and leaned against him. She was trembling. Marshall could feel her pulse racing. His breath caught in his throat.

"Don't be scared." He carefully put an arm around her. "The police won't do anything to us. They have no reason to. We haven't done anything wrong."

Sue stiffened and looked at him. Her gaze was hard all of a sudden; it belonged to an adult. An adult who had gone through too much to indulge in sentimentality.

"You don't even believe that yourself, do you?" She pulled herself free and ran off.

The second floor. Six minutes left. More patrol cars pulled up. Marshall counted eight vehicles now. Officers stepped out of them. Every single one wore body armor and had their visors down. They reminded Marshall of the combat robots from Sid's stories.

There was no sign of Sid on the second floor.

Sue pushed past Marshall as she ran down to the first floor.

At the door to the twins' room, she stopped as if she'd collided with a wall. "Tyler, what are you doing?" she screamed shrilly. "No! Don't!"

A moment later, the shot rang out.

A piercing pain stabbed through Marshall's chest, making him scream. The stinging sensation expanded; it burned like fire. He felt blood streaming out of the wound as his heart pumped furiously. His legs gave way as if they'd been knocked out from under him

with a cudgel.

He fell hard to the floor. It stank of mold and of hot asphalt soft baked by the June sun. Mere inches separated his head from the windowpane.

On the street, the police ran to their vehicles. The light of the setting sun glistened off their body armor. It made them look like machines.

Only one person remained behind. An overweight black woman in an old-fashioned uniform made of cotton; a material far too heavy for the heat of the Texan summer. A piece of paper to a bullet.

Blood gushed from her chest in the frantic rhythm of her pounding heart. It soaked her uniform and formed a pool on the asphalt.

Deborah.

She took her last breath.

John Marshall died with her.

15.

Rhodan didn't reply. He nodded and began to follow Crest's order to leave the cabin.

"Not so fast." Bull blocked his friend's path. "Where are you taking us, Crest?"

The old Arkonide looked at Bull with what Rhodan read as pity. And, contradictory as it seemed, understanding.

"I beg you," said Crest softly, "don't make this matter more unpleasant than it already is."

"'*This matter*'? Why, you..."

Crest made way for them to enter the corridor. Rhodan put a hand on his crewmate's shoulder and whispered, "Stop. Just do what he says. Please."

For an instant, Bull fought back the impulse to declare his friend insane. Then his trust in Rhodan got the upper hand. He stood aside without another word.

A half-dozen robots awaited them, the barrels of their weapons aimed squarely at the two men. A red light flickered in the muzzles, as if a fire burned there that was ready and waiting to consume the humans.

Bull snorted. "I know one thing. The Arkonides, and Crest, may think they're gods and we're wild animals, but we sure do leave them scared stiff."

His observation had a ring of fearlessness, but Rhodan sensed that his friend was only trying to cover up his own mortal terror. He couldn't have overlooked the seventh robot, which stood slightly apart from the others and was unarmed. In its arms, it held the men's space suits and helmets. That could only mean one thing: Thora had enforced her will over the old man's.

Crest ignored Bull's comment. "This way," he said.

The robots formed a circle around the pair and started moving. Rhodan and Bull had no choice but to follow the prescribed path if they didn't want to be shoved along.

In silence, they followed the passageways. Several times, they

encountered Arkonides. The aliens paid them no mind. They strolled about as if in a dream, their faces hidden behind cascades of light projected in front of their heads. Crest evaded them as matter-of-factly as if they were naturally occurring obstacles. The robot escort followed his lead, abruptly shunting Rhodan and Bull to the side to avoid disturbing those crew members who were lost in a world of fiction.

They came to an anti-grav shaft. Rhodan pushed past his fear of plunging into the abyss and stepped into the tube. He felt the anti-grav field take hold of him with a softness that seemed at odds with the roughness of the robots.

Rhodan closed his eyes. He forgot about the robots, forgot about the old Arkonide who was ushering them forward, determined to fulfill a painful but inescapable duty. He forgot about his friend Reginald Bull, who was floating an arm's length away from him, thinking his own desperate thoughts. Bull wasn't a man who'd let himself be led like a lamb to the slaughter. He wouldn't die without a struggle. He would try to go down fighting, even if it meant taking on the robots with his bare hands.

But that was futile. The robots were combat machines. In this arena, the Arkonides had them outgunned. But in a different arena...

Rhodan opened his eyes and looked down at Crest below him. The Arkonide was upright as he floated, but it was hard not to notice that even with the help of the anti-grav field, this posture was a strain that he could only bear with great effort. That frailty could be their salvation. It was their one hope.

The anti-grav shaft ended in the roof of a hangar. They had to be at least a hundred meters high now. Their path followed the curve of the ship's outer hull, and there below them...

"Imagine, Perry!" Bull whispered, forgetting about his deathly fear for a brief moment. "Imagine if we had even one of those ships. Just one!"

There were four. Four, as far as he could see. Rhodan made some calculations. Assuming the hangar spanned the entire radius of the *Aetron*, there had to be sixteen of them. Sixteen auxiliary craft, each a perfect scaled-down replica of the *Aetron*. They were fifty, maybe sixty meters in diameter and each was the product of millennia of experience, of generations of scientists and engineers, of a civilization that had expanded to hundreds, maybe thousands

of planets. A civilization that likely no longer counted its members in billions but trillions.

Mere auxiliary craft. And every single one of them infinitely superior to everything mankind had ever built. If they had just one of those in their possession, the universe would be their oyster. Nothing could hold them back. Nothing.

At the bottom of the hangar, a single Arkonide was waiting: Thora.

"Your presence is not required, Thora," said Crest in English when the field set him, the robots, and the two men down onto the hangar's floor. "I'm quite capable of carrying out my duty."

"Of that, I don't have the slightest doubt," Thora replied, also speaking the humans' language. Her gaze was directed firmly at her crewmate, as if the two men beside them didn't even exist. "But you know that my duty as commander of our expedition is to ensure that every single task runs smoothly, even those of little importance."

"Absolutely."

Crest gave the robots a signal. A gap opened in the circle that enclosed the two men. The unarmed robot hovered through it and presented Rhodan and Bull with their space suits.

The men took them. Bull did so after a short, barely noticeable hesitation, which Rhodan apprehensively read as his friend considering whether to make his last stand here and now.

In silence, the friends helped each other don the heavy suits.

"We've examined your suits' functionality," said Crest as Rhodan and Bull were sliding their arms into the sleeves. "There are no defects."

The magnetic seams locked together, sealing the chest pieces. Bull passed Rhodan his supply pack. Rhodan shouldered his own. The weight was so heavy that it came close to making him tumble backwards. The supply packs had been conceived with microgravity or the low gravity of the Moon in mind; none of the designers had reckoned with astronauts having to wear them in artificial gravity equivalent to that of Earth.

"The breathing units are unchanged externally," said Crest. "Their primitive inner workings have been removed and replaced with Arkonide technology. You'll note that the air supply will suffice for eight Earth days."

Rhodan held Bull's supply pack up to his friend's back. Once

Bull had secured his suit, Rhodan turned slowly to face the old man.

"Eight days," he said. "Eight days of torment before our deaths. At your hands."

"That's... That's not true." The old Arkonide staggered as if Rhodan had struck him. "You can't just..."

"Don't beat around the bush," Rhodan swiftly continued. He had to seize the opportunity that the Arkonide's shock offered him. "I know you're just doing your duty, Crest. I don't blame you. You have to follow the rules of your society, and these rules demand that my friend and I not be allowed to remain on board your *incredible* ship. We're animals, unworthy of your society, condemned to go out into the vacuum of the Moon. To our deaths."

Thora inhaled sharply. Her eyelids narrowed to slits and tears flowed from her eyes, running down her cheeks in two streams. She wasn't crying as such. Tears, Rhodan realized, didn't signify sadness for the Arkonides but intense emotion, including anger.

Thora knew exactly what was happening in front of her. Rhodan was trying to put himself on even footing with Crest—above him, even. He, the primitive one, had magnanimously refrained from assigning blame to the venerable Arkonide scientist.

"What saddens me," Rhodan added hastily, before she had time to order the robots to throw him and Bull off the ship, "is that you'll be sharing in our fate before too long, Crest."

"I'll...what?" The old Arkonide staggered again. He reached out for something to keep himself from falling.

"Crest, no!" Thora moved a step closer, grabbing his right hand to catch him. For a single moment, the Arkonide commander had forgotten about the two upstart apes. Rhodan caught a glimpse of the Thora that lay hidden behind the mask of arrogance: a woman who loved and revered an old man as if he were her own father. More than that, as if her people's fate was tied to his.

"I'd give you three months, maybe four," Rhodan continued, "assuming your physical constitution resembles that of a human. And I'm confident in that assumption after having had the chance to spend some time on your ship and study your species."

Thora's head whipped around. "You dare to compare humans with Arkonides? You—"

"Let him speak, Thora!" Crest interrupted.

The elder had regained his composure. He pulled himself free from her supportive hand; he didn't need it anymore. Rhodan's

declaration seemed to have unleashed unforeseen strength in him. He looked relieved, as though he was happy that someone had finally said aloud what had been kept under wraps aboard the Arkonide ship at all costs: Crest was a dying man.

He turned to face Rhodan. "Please, keep going!"

"Thanks!" Rhodan placed his suit's helmet on the floor. The robots let him do it. "You're suffering from a disease that's known on Earth as leukemia. Your body produces an excess of white blood cells, disrupting normal blood formation. At first it's barely noticeable, but the disruptions gradually grow worse and worse until finally your body gives out."

"And what makes you so sure that I'm suffering from this disease?" Crest asked.

"Simple observation. I've looked at you, Crest. I've looked carefully at everything in your incredible ship." This time he said it without the slightest hint of irony. "And I've made comparisons. Paleness is clearly a feature of Arkonide physiology. But you, Crest, are not pale. You're sallow. Looking closely, I can also see tiny red spots on your skin."

"You perceive more than most Arkonides," Crest commented, "but these spots could simply be an ordinary sign of old age. I'm the only elderly Arkonide aboard the *Aetron*. You lack any frame of reference."

"That's true. But my grandfather died of this condition. The symptoms are etched into my memory. I'm certain those spots are a result of abnormal hemostasis. You get exhausted easily, Crest. You travel long distances with robotic assistance. There's also your posture. You're hunching over more and more, as though every bone in your body hurts. Isn't that right?"

It was. Crest offered no reply. Nor did Thora. Rhodan had hit the nail on the head.

"Let's assume you're correct, Rhodan," the alien said at last. "What then?"

"We can heal you, Crest."

"*You?*"

"Not me personally. We humans. In recent years, we've made tremendous breakthroughs in cancer research. Leukemia is among the varieties that now has a recovery rate of almost one hundred percent as long as it's not at an advanced stage."

"And in my case, it might be curable?"

“I can’t determine that, but a member of my team, Eric Manoli, is a doctor. He stayed behind in the *Stardust* along with Clark Flipper. Eric is one of the best doctors on Earth.”

“He could heal me?”

“It’s entirely possible. At the very least, he could ascertain whether you still have any hope left. But…”

“But?”

“But it’s not possible here on the Moon. Our ship isn’t equipped for a case like this.”

“Ours is. It’s outfitted for every eventuality.”

“That may well be, Crest, but have you been cured yet?”

The old Arkonide fell silent.

“Crest, I don’t deny the Arkonides’ superiority,” Rhodan said. “But we’re talking about your life. Eric can save you. I’m sure. You just have to give him the chance. But that chance only exists on Earth. There are other doctors there, specialists he can consult. There are equipment and methods that you’ll probably find embarrassingly primitive, but they’re tried and tested, and waiting for you a stone’s throw away.”

Crest wrestled with himself. He glanced at Thora, who stood paralyzed beside him, torn between her arrogance, her unyielding rules, and the unexpected hope of saving the elderly Arkonide’s life.

Then he looked at the two humans. They had come to fight for their own lives armed with an unbeatable weapon: an offer to save his.

The power of that weapon was overwhelming.

Crest turned to Thora. “This changes everything. Bring the other humans here!”

She didn’t object.

16.

“John! John!”

John Marshall felt a warm hand clutch and tug at him with the heedless rough force of desperation. An arm stump helplessly ran across his skin.

He opened his eyes and looked into those of Sue. Hers were wide open. Tears glistened in them. The girl had fallen to her knees and was bent over him.

He had died. He was alive.

“John, are you all right?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve been hit. A bullet.”

“Where?”

A strange question. Had fear and alarm left her blind? There was blood everywhere. He’d felt it seeping out of the wound in his chest. It had soaked his shirt like lukewarm water, fully saturating the fabric and running onto the floor. It covered the hand with which he’d tried to plug the hole in his chest.

“My chest.” As he spoke, he wondered how he could form the words with so little difficulty.

Sue sat up and cocked her head. “Where? I don’t see anything!”

What was wrong with her? Marshall raised his head and looked down at himself.

There was no wound. His shirt was soaked through, yes, but with sweat, not blood. He lifted his right hand and held it right in front of his face.

No blood.

Suddenly, the pain disappeared. Marshall searched for the feeling and found nothing but an echo. An icy echo that made the hair on his forearms stand on end, but still only a vague memory drifting into the distance.

He realized he was lying next to the window. He had to have crawled to the side. He turned and managed to flip onto his stomach, then he crawled back to the window to look down at the street.

“Are you crazy? They’re shooting!” Sue tried to hold him back, but the girl was too weak for that.

The street in front of the shelter was empty. The police officers had taken cover behind their vehicles. One solitary figure was still visible: Deborah. She was no longer moving. The flow of blood from the wound in her chest had dried up.

She was dead.

A thought occurred to Marshall. A ridiculous thought. Was it possible that...

Sue tugged at his sleeve. “Not on the street, John! It’s Damon and Tyler! They have guns! They opened fire!”

Opened fire and murdered Deborah.

“Where are they?” John asked.

“In their room!”

Marshall crawled past the window, pressed low to the floor. Mold. The smell of asphalt was gone. Frightened children cowered in small, tightly packed clusters on the stairs. They were crying. They didn’t understand what was happening.

Marshall would have gladly comforted them, assured them that everything would be fine, but he didn’t have time. Deborah was dead. He had to ensure that the death count remained at one.

The door to the bedroom was open. The twins sat straddle-legged on the floor, their backs against the wall to the left and right of the window. Between their legs, propped up by the grips, each held an assault rifle. Modified AKs, the preferred weapon of gangs. Robust, literally child’s play to operate, available on every street corner, and armor-piercing.

Two other weapons sat on the floor in front of them. Beside them were piles of spare magazines. One of the beds had been pushed aside. Three floorboards had been removed and rested against the wall; where they had been, a hollow space beneath was now visible. The twins’ hiding spot.

How could he have been so blind? Sue had been right. He should have thrown them out of the shelter a long time ago.

Tyler was smoking a cigarette, inhaling the smoke in long drags like a man who’d just taken care of a tough job and was treating himself to a reward.

“Tyler! Damon!” Marshall cried. “What are you doing?”

Tyler puffed out the smoke and passed the cigarette to his brother under the window frame. “Leave us alone! You just don’t

get it, old man."

Saint Christopher dangled from his neck. The amulet gleamed. The boy had secured it to a steel chain to ensure the saint never abandoned him again.

"Give me some damn credit! What don't I get?" *Do you know what you've done?* he added internally. *You've committed murder!*

"The cops want to take us in. That's not gonna happen."

"The police didn't come here for you!"

"So *you* say."

"It's the truth! They're here because of Sid. They told me so!"

Damon handed the cigarette back. "And you believe them? You're too nice for this world, geezer. Who gives a crap about Sid González? The cops want us. But they're not getting us."

"They wanted Sid! All of this is...is totally needless!"

Tyler shrugged. He raised one arm and gestured with his thumb, pointing down at the street where the police were assembled, and where Deborah, their victim, lay unmoving. "Too late."

"You... You..." Marshall stopped talking. It was pointless. He felt it. Something had broken in the twins. A barrier. There was no way back now. They...

Someone pushed past Marshall into the room. Sue. She planted herself in front of the twins with her hand on her hip.

"You two think you're so great with your smokes and your badass guns, don't you?"

Tyler, who had just taken a drag, spluttered.

"But you know what?" she continued. "You're just putting on an act! Smoking and killing people doesn't make you powerful. Power is not needing a gun in your hand to feel important! It's not thinking the world is conspiring against you because of every little thing that rubs you the wrong way! It's knowing when to open your mouth and talk instead of decking other people in the face! Real power is—"

The rest of her sentence was swallowed up by a heavy crackling sound. It was like hail only much, much louder and harder. Bullets. The police had opened fire and were blasting the shelter with their automatic weapons.

The assault only lasted for a few moments. To Marshall, it was half an eternity.

Then came silence.

Breathless silence.

The pungent smell of gunpowder drifted into the room through the open window. It was mixed with an undertone of mold, no doubt from the chipped outer facade.

"Scram while you still have a chance!" Tyler ordered. "It's too late." He took one last drag of the cigarette then threw the butt aside indifferently.

Sue didn't budge. She stamped her foot in rage. "It's never too late! The cops deliberately aimed at the building! They're sending a message. You don't stand a chance against them! Give yourselves up!"

"My brother told you to scram, cripple!" Damon muttered.

Cripple. Sue turned red with anger. "Who's really a cripple? The one with a stump for an arm or the ones who are messed up in the head? You—"

Damon lifted the gun, aimed it at the girl and pulled the trigger. The wall burst open next to Sue's head. Fragments of plaster flew in all directions, boring into Marshall's right arm like shards of glass.

Sue stood there for a moment, her mouth hanging open. Half her face was white from plaster dust, like a geisha in full makeup. The white turned pink as blood flowed from tiny cuts made by the chunks of debris, blending with the powder.

It was too much for her. Sue screamed, turned on her heel, and ran out and down the stairs.

Marshall ran after her. There was nothing more he could do for the twins.

He didn't get far. A bullet pierced his shoulder—pierced John Marshall. He screamed and clutched at the shoulder where he believed the projectile had broken through his body armor.

Marshall stumbled but caught himself at the last moment. A second bullet pierced his stomach. Embers flared up inside him, burning him alive.

A third bullet. His skull cracked open, and then the pain was gone again. He reared up, somehow retaining his balance.

A fourth bullet hit. In his thigh this time.

Marshall doubled over in pain. His hand grasped for something to lean on but came up empty. He tumbled down the stairs, slamming against the hard tiles on the first floor with a gasp.

Sue had squeezed herself into the niche built for the telephone the Imperial Sugar Company's owners had once generously

provided for their workers. She had drawn up her legs, wrapped both her healthy arm and her stump around her knees, and was bawling unrestrainedly. She didn't notice Marshall's presence.

Too much. It was simply too much. The pain. The suffering. The death. It had to end. Somehow. At all costs.

Marshall heaved himself up. He wrenched open the heavy front door. Outside, the sun cast long shadows; the warm evening glow lent the scene an incongruously soft tone.

He put his hands up and walked down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Stop!" he blared. "Stop right now!"

He walked into the street and towards the patrol cars. Slowly. "Stop!" he called again and again. "Stop!"

The shots died down. Marshall walked farther. "What are you doing? Can't you feel the suffering?" He stopped by Deborah's corpse. "Life is irreplaceable. It's—"

A gunshot. A bullet penetrated his calf. He slumped to the ground.

No! he thought. *Stand up! It's not your wound, not your pain!*

He forced his hand away from his calf and held it up to his face to prove to himself that it wasn't his own wound he was feeling.

Blood caked his fingers. *His* blood.

"John!" Sue took the steps to the sidewalk in one leap and ran over to him. Shots rang out, bullets driving into the asphalt to her left and right.

She fell silent as the police officers opened fire and forced the twins to take cover.

"No!" Marshall roared. "Get away, Sue!"

The girl didn't listen. She threw herself on him, trying to protect him with her own body, though it was much too thin and scrawny. Marshall seized her with both hands. He yanked her away, desperate to cover her, to protect her.

Sparks flew and blinded him. Dazzling white light. A scorching hot wind.

A hand reached for his. It belonged to Sid. The chubby teenager bent down over John with an imploring gaze. He was wearing his homemade space suit, the one he'd wanted to bring with him to Nevada Fields.

Sid González squeezed tightly. Sparks flew, and a wave of dazzling light carried John Marshall away.

Then came darkness.

Sweet, merciful darkness.

17.

Thora turned away from Crest. His demand had to go against her deepest convictions. She slapped her thigh with the flat of her right hand. The sound was like a whip crack that echoed off the hangar walls.

A painfully dazzling speck of light appeared before her. It grew into a blazing miniature sun before developing into a three-dimensional panorama. It was the Moon, seen from a height of several kilometers and filmed by a camera that was racing across the lunar sky.

Leaving crater-strewn plains in its wake, it finally arrived at a rugged mountain range.

"Perry, this looks familiar!" Bull whispered. "It must be..."

The camera stopped abruptly. For a few moments, it looked down at the lunar surface. Then it appeared to charge the viewer as the camera plunged towards the Moon like a bird of prey swooping in on its target.

The target was the *Stardust*.

Rhodan recognized the hulking fuselage that rose from the plain like a crude tower. With its man-made symmetry, it stood out from the mass of rock and dust that pure happenstance had crafted over the course of millennia. Next to the ship, surrounded by a heap of tools, stood two people in bulky space suits tinkering with one of the craft's landing struts.

In their desperation to lighten the load, Eric Manoli and Clark Flipper had started stripping off pieces of the craft itself. In the vacuum, their outlines were as clear as if they'd been cut out by a knife.

Then a haze covered the image. It reminded Rhodan of a hot summer's day on Earth when the air visibly shimmered. The image lurched, and the *Stardust* soared into the sky. Not just the *Stardust*, but the two astronauts, the many instruments and parts around them, and a portion of the Moon's surface dozens of meters in circumference as well. A perfectly round hole was left in its wake.

“Another energy beam. They’re trying to impress us,” whispered Bull.

Rhodan stayed silent. His friend’s observation was accurate; a glance at Thora, who had lifted her arms and was guiding the transport with hand gestures, was enough to discern that.

The two men watched as the Arkonides’ energy beam took just minutes to carry the *Stardust* the same distance that had taken them a day in their tracked vehicle.

Then one of the hangar doors opened. The floor quaked beneath their feet as the immense door slid aside to reveal the crater where the *Aetron* had landed. Rhodan had expected the air to be sucked out, but it wasn’t. An invisible energy shield must have been keeping the air inside.

The *Stardust* came into view. As if by magic, it softly floated into the hangar and came to a stop between two of the sixty-meter auxiliary craft. The humans’ ship was tiny in comparison to the Arkonides’. It looked like a toy. This impression held up, in fact; compared to the *Aetron* and its auxiliary craft, the *Stardust* was little more than a glorified canoe. Along with it had come a chunk of the Moon’s surface, the piles of equipment, and the container for the mobile infirmary.

The two men who had been swept up along with the *Stardust* slowly righted themselves. Clark Flipper let the welding iron he’d been using on one of the struts fall to his side. Eric Manoli, who had been about to hand his crewmate a tool, loosened his grip. The item crashed to the floor with a loud clatter.

The pair couldn’t register what had happened. Like sleepwalkers, they looked up and swiveled their heads in all directions, trying to make sense of what they were seeing. They knew that it was impossible. Totally impossible.

Bull switched on his suit’s transceiver, cleared his throat, and said, “Nope, you haven’t lost your minds.” He paused to give them a chance to process his words, then continued. “Welcome to the future!”

Five people were squeezed into the cramped mobile infirmary that the *Stardust* had brought to the Moon: four humans and one Arkonide.

Rhodan, Bull, and Flipper were there as nervous onlookers. The idea of twiddling their thumbs in the Arkonide starship’s hangar

while history was possibly being written a few steps away had been too unbearable to imagine. Manoli, the doctor, had quickly shaken off his disconcertment and was handling the alien like he would any other patient who urgently needed his help; for all intents and purposes, that was all Crest was. Finally, there was the alien himself, Crest da Zoltral, who proved to be a thoroughly tractable patient.

The old Arkonide placidly submitted to everything Manoli had to offer. A blood sample, traditional X-rays, another blood sample, spinal fluid extraction, injection of radiocontrast agents, another blood sample, and analysis. The infirmary's resources went far beyond the needs of the *Stardust*'s crew in case the members of Armstrong Base had needed medical attention. Even so, it was equipped for treating accidents, not an illness like leukemia.

Manoli concluded his examinations. He immersed himself in the results processed by the infirmary's computer, which had survived the *Aetron*'s attack unscathed.

"And?" asked Crest as the minutes dragged on. "What did you find out?"

Manoli turned away from the display where he had been rapidly switching between several open windows and faced the old man. "You are a remarkable being, Crest." He tapped on his palm with the stylus he usually swiped across the screen.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Crest replied. The Arkonide had sat up on the bed and wrapped his arms around his knees. It was a deeply human gesture.

"On Earth, you could easily pass for human. Maybe not without arousing a certain degree of curiosity, but humanity encompasses a broad spectrum." He furrowed his brow. "At least, people would accept that explanation much more readily than they'd believe you're an alien. Honestly, my examinations could leave me in just as much doubt. The metabolism of humans and Arkonides has an uncanny similarity. You could almost think our species are close relatives."

It was a staggering thought, but Crest didn't let it shake him. "We Arkonides have learned over the millennia that life usually traces similar paths. As different as life-sustaining oxygen planets may appear, in essence they are very similar. Thus, it's only logical that the life forms have many things in common."

"That makes sense." Manoli scratched the side of his head with

the stylus. “And life everywhere is subject to compromises. For example, your species has a closed breastplate instead of ribs. The plate protects the organs far better than ribs do. On the other hand, it’s more rigid than ribs, and its weight is—”

“Dr. Manoli, I look forward to discussing the biology of our species and the various advantages and disadvantages another time.” The elder had now raised himself fully upright on the bed, supporting himself with both hands on the edges. “Please, tell me: what is my condition? And be honest, please.”

“Honest?” Manoli put the stylus aside. “Very well. In a word: serious. Your red blood cell count is dwindling by the hour. If we assume the rate will remain constant—which is optimistic—you have at best a month, maybe two, before your body enters a state of severe oxygen deficiency.”

“Which means?”

“Pain. Anguish. Finally, the end. How exactly it will come, I can’t say in advance. A heart attack, organ failure, maybe you’ll simply catch an infection that your body can’t fight off anymore.”

Silence followed his words. Tears welled up in Crest’s eyes. “But you can help me?” he asked.

“I believe so. But as my crewmate Rhodan has told you, it’s only possible on Earth...”

“...and not on board the *Aetron*. You don’t need to say it. Our ship is a technical marvel, but its crew is lost in artificial worlds. My suffering is not enough to drag them back to reality. But that’s no great surprise. If even our mission objective wasn’t enough...”

Crest’s words petered out. Given the Arkonides’ miraculous technology, healing him might, no, *would* have been a trifle. Only, it would require his fellow Arkonides to part from their games for a few hours, and they weren’t prepared to do that. And without the help of an Arkonide, the *Aetron*’s robots were helpless.

“Crest,” said Rhodan quietly. He went over to the bed and bent down to face the old man. “You can live. We can heal you. Just think: to get here, you’ve crossed a gulf of thousands of light-years, a distance so vast that it’s beyond human imagination. Now all that separates you from rescue is one more step. Out there.” He pointed towards the infirmary’s wall. “Out there in the hangar are your auxiliary craft. Abandoned because none of your crewmates can imagine any goal in the real world that’s worth flying to. You know better, Crest. On those, life awaits. On Earth. Each of those vessels

can reach our world in a matter of hours. Minutes, even, unless I'm drastically overestimating your technology. Seize your chance!"

The old Arkonide broke free of his tense stiffness. He lifted his head, and in his tear-filled eyes was suddenly a glimmer. The will to live had begun to stir in him.

"You're right, Rhodan. I'll..."

"You'll do nothing!" The voice came from the doorway. "Nothing whatsoever."

Thora. Her concern for Crest must have been deep enough for her to overcome her revulsion at the humans and finally enter the *Stardust*'s infirmary.

"Stop tormenting an old man!"

"He's ill," said Rhodan. "We're trying to help him."

"Barbarians like you?"

"I'm glad to hear you no longer see us as animals."

"You—" Thora stopped short, surprised by Rhodan's quick-wittedness, but more so by the realization that the human was speaking the truth. He was trying to save the life of a being who had been ready to strand them on the Moon, where they would have inevitably suffocated.

"You'll... You'll take away his dignity!" she continued. "I'll never allow that!"

"Then Crest will die," Rhodan replied.

"So you claim. There's no reason for me to believe a word you say!"

Anger burned in Thora's eyes. Rhodan withstood her gaze, and in the same moment observed, to his own astonishment, that his attitude towards her had also changed. Her arrogance was a front. Behind it lay sincere concern for Crest and a readiness to fight for what she believed was right. Her attitude commanded his respect, even if it might cost him and Bull their lives.

"You have no reason to distrust us," said Rhodan. "Dr. Manoli is __"

"You can stop arguing." The whispered sentence was enough to cut Rhodan off. It had come from Crest. "I've made my decision."

The old Arkonide pushed himself off the bed and came unsteadily to his feet. He managed to stay upright without leaning on anything.

"Thora," he whispered, "I appreciate your concern. You're doing all this to protect me. But there's only one path for me. I must

go with the humans. I have to trust them."

Thora trembled. Her hand moved towards the weapon on her belt, then stopped, reluctantly, as though it took all her self-control not to shoot the upstart savages where they stood.

At last, she said, "I cannot deny your request."

She turned on her heel, about to leave the infirmary, but Rhodan halted her with a question.

"Does that mean you'll give us a ship?"

"No. Why should I?" She looked at Rhodan with loathing. "You already have one, don't you?"

She slammed her fist against the door frame and fled the infirmary.

18.

Three days after his chat with Li De and Medvenkov, Allan Mercant was arrested.

Four military police officers knocked on the door to his room in the Nevada Fields control center's residential wing and demanded they come with him.

Mercant obeyed without offering any resistance. The military police surrounded him, brought him to the elevator, and took him down to the deepest reaches of the tower. Like all of the spaceport's buildings, it extended underground into several stories that served as protective bunkers during rocket tests. The lowest level was home to the detention cells.

The officers led Mercant into a cell, bolted the door shut, and left him there alone. It was cold and wet, an unheard of sensation in Nevada. He sat on the cell's narrow bed, took the blanket, and wrapped it around his shoulders.

This was the end for him. Homeland Security had his number. He'd known it would happen one day. He was a single, fallible human, while the bureau he worked for was the most important one in the country. A lumbering leviathan, blind at times despite its all-knowingness, but not to be underestimated. The department had eyes and ears everywhere. Mercant's double-crossing couldn't have evaded their attention forever.

This was a sober assessment that didn't feel proportionate to the situation. Mercant was surprised by himself, by the strange calm that filled him. True, he had failed. But it didn't bother him. He'd done what he had to do. That was all that counted.

As a child, Allan Mercant had dreamed about how his life would turn out. He'd pictured adventures—as a pilot, a doctor, a video game champion, and as an agent too. Young Allan had had no notion of failure let alone a real concept of death. He'd believed there was nothing more noble than serving his country and, if need be, sacrificing his life for it.

Soon, that time would come. The department held speedy trials

for traitors like him. They would—

The door opened with a squeak. A lone old man entered the cell. Lesly Pounder.

"Pounder!"

For an instant, Mercant froze, astonished to see the last visitor he would have expected. Pounder was not on good terms with Homeland Security. Was he a prisoner too? No, he looked too self-assured and moved with too much purpose, like a man with an important task to carry out.

Mercant shot up. Over the years, he'd learned that the only ones who survived were those who grabbed the opportunities life handed them. "Pounder! I'm so glad you're here! You have to—"

His visitor cut him off with a decisive hand gesture. "Save your theatrics, Mercant. I don't have much time."

Pounder signaled for him to take a seat again. Mercant did so; slowly, to avoid startling him with any quick motions, and to give him a chance to look the man over. What did Pounder want from him? The Flight Director of NASA was unarmed. All Mercant would need was for his attention to lapse for even a moment. In one leap, he'd be next to Pounder, his hands wrapped around the other man's throat...

"I came," said Pounder, "to inform you that your activities have not gone unnoticed."

"I figured that out myself." Mercant attempted a smile. Had he made the wrong call in trusting the old man? Had Pounder ratted him out to the department and come to gloat?

"Homeland Security has been keeping an eye on you for a long time," Pounder stated. "They've never trusted you."

"The department doesn't trust anyone."

No, Mercant decided. Neither Pounder's voice nor countenance held even a hint of malice. Only a tense and serious air...and perhaps anticipation?

"That's true. But we both know the department's all-seeing eye is clouded. Too many people, too many divisions, too many petty jealousies, too many overlapping jurisdictions. It's worse than NASA, hard as that is to imagine." Pounder shook his head disapprovingly. "Homeland Security has had you in its sights for a long time, and over the past few hours, those suspicions finally crossed the line. So for now, you've been tidied away, so to speak. You're not important, just some small fry that no one has the energy

to deal with at the moment. That's why you're here; why you're still alive, Mercant. If the department knew what you'd *really* done, you'd be gone by now."

"But *you* know?" asked Mercant.

So, Pounder hadn't been the one who'd gotten him arrested. But if so, what was he doing here in this cell with a traitor? The visit risked the flight director's own life and limb.

"Of course." Pounder smiled like a kid who'd pulled off a particularly clever prank. "Astonishing things are happening at NORAD, I hear. The missile defenses are in disarray. A state of alert has been ordered. It's the funniest thing, though. A considerable number of batteries are reporting missile failures. Software glitches have brought more of them to a standstill. And isn't it strange how right this very moment, when conflicts across the world are on the verge of boiling over, urgent maintenance work is being carried out at numerous key facilities? It's like witchcraft. And I think I know who waved their magic wand. You, Mercant."

"Based on what, exactly?"

"I have my sources. Remember how during our last meeting you raved about the world of secret agents? You suggested there are people who can see beyond the blinkered boundaries of human prejudice. A community that transcends the arbitrary categorizations of nation, race, and societal status. Well, your community is not the only one of its kind."

Pounder took a step closer. He was so close that the agent could have taken him out with no effort at all. But Mercant wasn't thinking about jumping Pounder anymore.

"I've been a rocket man all my life," Pounder continued. "As a kid, I followed the Moon landing on TV. I hardly slept for three days; I could feel history being made before my eyes. I also felt like something wasn't right when Armstrong hoisted the American flag. The stars are too big, too important, for individual nations to rule over them. Do you catch my drift?"

Mercant simply nodded. He didn't want to interrupt the man mid-flow.

"You can call me crazy if you like. A crackpot who could never settle for the idea that this wretched, arduous existence is all there is for us humans. I've always dreamed of journeying to the stars. There aren't a lot of people like me. Spread across the globe, maybe a few thousand of us. And where do you reckon you can find these

crazies?"

"In the space programs," Mercant replied, stating the obvious.

"Yes. But not just there. Space flight isn't much loved by Earth's governments. We're kept at arm's length and left to slowly waste away. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. In the military, though, it's a whole different story. The militaries of the world are swimming in cash. That's why a lot of astrophiles end up there after a while. On the outside, they're good soldiers and patriots. In reality, they have a whole different mindset."

"And they act accordingly?"

"That's what they're doing right now, yes." Pounder nodded. "Their outrage leaves them no other choice. Your warning was right on the money, Mercant. Homeland Security knows nothing but fear. The only way it can respond to the unknown is by trying to destroy it. The department really did smuggle a nuclear bomb onto the *Stardust*'s ground vehicle." Pounder balled his hands into fists. "Those idiots. They would have dragged us all down with them! But thanks to your warning, I was able to notify Rhodan. And he took action. The *Stardust* is en route to Earth as we speak."

This revelation left Mercant breathless. The *Stardust* was coming home. That meant the bomb hadn't gone off after all. So, Perry Rhodan had succeeded in making contact with the aliens.

Mercant cleared his throat. "Pounder, that's fantastic!"

"Yes, but sadly not fantastic enough. Rhodan has only climbed the first rung of the ladder, with countless more to follow. That's why my fellow astrophiles had to spring into action. My friends inform me that in these critical hours when world peace hangs by a thread, the US's missile defense system is pretty much exposed. If, for example, a ship tried to land on Earth and, let's say, carried out its landing procedures differently than scheduled, the government would be as good as powerless to stop it. And that's your doing, Mercant. You're a traitor to your nation."

Traitor... Was that a ring of approval in Pounder's voice? Or was that wishful thinking, and he was actually hearing disgust?

Mercant cleared his throat to give himself time to find a suitable reply. He didn't need to.

"But it looks like you're not the only one," Pounder continued. "Listen. We space aficionados form a community that disregards all national, ethnic, or ideological borders. Its tendrils even reach the People's Republic of China and Great Russia. I know what's going

on there better than Homeland Security and all the other intelligence agencies. And strange things are happening, let me tell you. Their missile defenses are virtually paralyzed as well, as if they each had their own versions of Allan Mercant."

Pounder knew everything. There was no point in playing dumb anymore. "Clearly, the traitors were successful," he commented, not bothering to hide his joy.

"Yes and no. The defenses are down, sure. But it came at a cost. One hour ago in Beijing, a high-ranking secret service officer was brought before a court, found guilty of high treason, and immediately shot. His name was Li De."

Pounder paused for a moment to give Mercant a chance to respond. When Mercant said nothing, he continued.

"That's not all, I'm afraid. Right now, an FSB officer is being interrogated in the cellars under Lubyanka in Moscow. His name is Medvenkov. I doubt he'll ever see the light of day again. Great Russia doesn't take kindly to traitors."

Mercant nodded, staring off into the distance. He barely even registered Pounder's presence anymore.

"No one takes kindly to traitors," he said at last. "How about you, Pounder? What do you think of them?"

"I think treason is a matter of perspective. You've inarguably betrayed the United States of America. You've broken your oath. But I think that's an insignificant detail next to the immeasurable service you've done for humanity."

Pounder pulled a bundle of papers from his jacket's inside pocket and threw it onto the bed.

"What's this?"

"Everything you need to survive until the new era dawns. A new identity, money, the key to the fully fueled car waiting for you by the east-side exit."

Mercant said nothing. No response came to him. Pounder had thrown him a lifeline.

He reached for the papers cautiously, as if they might vanish into thin air the moment he touched them. But they were real. Mercant looked down at the driver's license with his face on it. He, the experienced secret agent, couldn't tell that it was a forgery.

"The guards are in on it," said Pounder. "I'll leave the cell door unlocked. Wait a few minutes before you go, please. It's important that my position isn't compromised. We're on the same team, you

and I, but to succeed, we'll have to tread different paths. There's still a need for Flight Director Lesly Pounder." He looked at the time. "I have to get going. Otherwise I'll be late."

"Late for what?"

"The most crucial performance of my life," he replied with a smirk. "I'll make the whole world believe the impossible: that Lesly Pounder can be rendered speechless!"

Without another word, he turned and left the cell.

Mercant shuffled through the papers and the cash, then he stood up and turned the door handle. His hands trembled.

The door was open, the passage empty. He took the elevator to the ground floor and left the building by the side exit. A gray Ford was parked there; one of the old gasoline models that you rarely saw nowadays. The key fit the ignition. When the guards at the main gate saw him, they greeted him affably and raised the barriers.

Mercant accelerated and drove out into the uninhabited expanse of Nevada. He rolled down the window. The hot wind blew into the car and through his hair. Sand flew into his eyes and made them water.

Allan Mercant was a traitor.

He was leaving his whole life behind.

He had never felt more free.

19.

"Are you ready?" Rhodan strapped himself into the formchair in the *Stardust*'s cockpit, turned his head, and looked Crest in the eye. The red coloring was foreign, inhuman. At the same time, Rhodan detected the beginnings of familiarity emerging within them.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Crest replied.

Rhodan read no fear in the alien's countenance; only hope. If he wasn't mistaken, there was even a touch of thirst for adventure.

The old Arkonide had his own chair. The robots had placed it between Manoli's and Flipper's formchairs with millimeter-perfect precision. It appeared to be made from a single piece and looked fragile enough to collapse under the slightest strain. There could have been no clearer demonstration of the Arkonides' technological superiority. Rhodan was certain that Crest's chair could withstand anything, even the *Stardust* burning up on reentry to the Earth's atmosphere—and that its Arkonide passenger would survive along with it.

Crest wasn't wearing a spacesuit. He didn't need one. An oxygen supply and protective shield generator were integrated into his seat. In an emergency, the shield would protect him long enough for Thora to fish him out of space, or the sea, or wherever he might end up.

Rhodan nodded and gave Bull a signal.

Bull cleared his throat. "Two hundred seconds to launch. Initiating final checks."

While his friend handled the launch sequence, Rhodan took a look through the porthole. The Arkonides had brought the human spacecraft out of the hangar and set it down at the foot of the crater. Rhodan could see pale Moon rock, the sheer crater walls, and an immense dark shadow resting on pillars three times as tall as the *Stardust*. It was the Arkonides' starship, the *Aetron*.

He wondered if he would ever come back to this place. He already knew the answer: yes, he would. He would fly to the Moon

again. To the Moon and far beyond. Just as long as he and his crewmates—and all of humanity—survived the next few days.

"Launching!" said Bull.

With a soft hum that felt at odds with the excitement and nerves burning inside Rhodan, the Arkonide propulsion units came online. Crest had assigned a host of robots to install them while small specialized machines had gotten to work inside the ship. They'd removed the ruined onboard computer and replaced it with an Arkonide model called a "Positronic." For the old Arkonide, it had taken a mere fifteen minutes to set all this in motion. However, it had been such an exhausting fifteen minutes for him that he'd had to lie down afterwards.

The g-force pushed Rhodan into the chair, but it wasn't overwhelming. He estimated a pressure of maybe five gravos—far from the force that he and his crew were capable of withstanding. And even that was far less than the Arkonide propulsion units could muster, he was sure.

Bull was wise to be cautious, however. The *Stardust* wasn't designed to handle that kind of power. Rhodan glanced at the display; like a rear-view mirror, it allowed him a view of the back of the cabin. Manoli and Flipper lay there in silence, their features strained. The g-force tugged at their flesh, trying to pull it from their bones.

Crest was untouched by it. He lay there as if the *Stardust* were at rest. This was no doubt due to the "inertial damper" Thora had mentioned.

Behind them, the Moon shrank into a pale marble, and a second, more colorful marble appeared on the screens: Earth.

Almost three days' flight still stood between them and their home. Rhodan gave the order to go into deep sleep, watched long enough to see that his men had complied, then triggered his own injection.

The darkness of space gave way to the darkness of slumber.

When Rhodan awoke, the colorful marble had turned into a planet that almost filled the entirety of the cockpit's viewing area.

"Back home at last," murmured Bull, who had woken up shortly before him.

"Almost," Rhodan replied. He turned his head, which felt abnormally light. Bull had brought the *Stardust* into a high orbit and

switched off the propulsion units, dropping the ship into microgravity. “Everything okay?”

His question was met with a trio of yeses.

Crest, who had also spent the flight in deep sleep, looked fresher than Rhodan had seen him yet. The prospect of being healed had unleashed unforeseen strength in him.

Rhodan’s gaze fell upon the weapon Crest wore on his belt. Thora had insisted he bring it along. Crest had vehemently opposed her but ultimately given in. The old Arkonide loved Thora as if she were his own daughter. Maybe she was. Rhodan decided to ask their guest later, as soon as they reached Earth.

He glanced at Manoli. The doctor didn’t meet his eyes; he was concentrating entirely on his patient. Whether this was out of fascination with the alien or a calculated effort to give himself a task to keep his mind off what lay ahead, Rhodan couldn’t say. It was likely a bit of both. Manoli was a disciplined, levelheaded man who never failed to find the most practical approach to any situation.

Only Flipper’s “yes” sounded pained.

“What’s wrong, Clark?”

The young astronaut was pale, with beads of sweat on his forehead. “Nothing. I... I just can’t help thinking of Beth. I’m sorry. It’s that view of the Earth, you know? Right down there...”

“I understand. No need to apologize.”

Asia was passing by beneath the *Stardust*. An icy mountain range divided the Indian subcontinent from the rest of the land mass: the Himalayas; the place where Beth had gone missing. And died, unless she’d been rescued while they were away.

“Clark, we’ll look into her as soon as we possibly can. All right?”

Flipper swallowed and was about to reply, but Bull spoke first. “Com transmission. NASA frequency, Nevada Fields ID. Should we pick up?”

The *Stardust*’s transceivers hadn’t survived the Arkonide attack. An Arkonide device had taken their place, capable of “both regular com and hypercom,” as Crest had assured them.

Rhodan nodded. “Yes. Video link. Unencrypted.”

Bull’s eyes narrowed. “Everyone and his dog’ll be watching and listening. You know that, right?”

“Yes. I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

Bull grinned. “Have I ever doubted you, Perry?”

Rhodan chose not to answer that. “Make sure Crest is in frame, okay?”

“Got it.”

A display sprang to life. A man’s face appeared; it had deep wrinkles and an angry vein protruding from a high forehead. Lesly Pounder.

Behind Pounder stretched a large room with computer workstations lined up like on spectator stands. The Nevada Fields control center. A giant display on the far wall showed an image of the earth. A stylized shuttle traced an orbit around the planet. The *Stardust*.

“...come in, please!” said Pounder. “*Stardust*, please come in! *Star*...” Pounder’s eyes widened when the connection to their ship was finally established. “Rhodan, you’re alive! Thank God! We’d given up all hope for you and your men. We...”

Pounder stopped when he noticed Crest. He was speechless for a moment, then he said, “Rhodan, what kind of being is that?”

With his keen mind, Pounder had recognized that he wasn’t looking at an ordinary astronaut rescued from a Moon base or another mission.

“His name is Crest da Zoltral,” Rhodan replied. “He’s an Arkonide—and a friend of humanity.” When Pounder opened his mouth to interject, Rhodan raised a hand and continued. “I wanted to introduce Crest before I head off. It’s all thanks to people like you that we had the honor of meeting him and the Arkonides. Goodbye, Pounder!”

“Excuse me? What... What the hell do you mean by...”

Rhodan broke off the connection. He heard a bewildered groan behind him. It came from Clark Flipper.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day!” Bull grinned broadly. “Pounder, the old dog, lost for words.”

“That’s just the beginning,” said Rhodan. “Take over the controls, Reg. The course is as we discussed.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Flipper called from behind. “What are you planning?”

“You’ll see for yourself soon enough!” cried Bull. “Watch out for your tongue!” With his right hand, he grabbed the joystick, and with the index finger of his left he swiped across a touch screen. The propulsion units came to life, making the ship decelerate

sharply. The g-force pushed the men hard into their formchairs as the *Stardust* began its descent to Earth.

"What are you doing?" Crest asked, puzzled but without the slightest hint of exertion in his voice. The inertial dampener in his seat kept him shielded from the pressure. "You're defying a superior officer!"

"For the sake of all mankind." Gasping, Rhodan uttered the words one by one. "There are moments when you can't follow the rules of society; when you have to follow the voice of your own conscience instead. No matter the price. This is one of those moments."

A few seconds passed before Crest spoke again. Rhodan's actions seemed to have left him utterly baffled. "I'm not too familiar with the human mindset," he said finally, "but on Arkon, your death would now be a certainty. I can't imagine that your superiors look kindly upon insubordination."

"They don't." Rhodan pointed to the radar. Swarms of dots were bearing down on their point in the center.

"What are those?" Crest asked.

"Missiles," said Bull, answering in Rhodan's stead. "Conventional and nuclear, I'll bet."

"Your government fired them."

"Our government, the Great Russians, the Chinese. Maybe also the Indians, Pakistanis, Israelis, Venezuelans, and a few other governments who are always indignantly denying they even have intercontinental nuclear capabilities." Bull shrugged. "Though I have to say, I figured there'd be a lot more."

"I thought the nations of humanity were hostile towards one another," said Crest.

"They are. But even bitter enemies will suddenly band together if a common enemy appears."

"Enemy? We're not enemies!"

Bull pointed to the Earth. "Try telling that to the global community of narrow-minded scaredy-cats down there."

Crest thought for a moment, evidently came to no solution, and said, "You knew that you would be greeted with violence. Why, then, did you announce our arrival?"

Rhodan took care of replying. "They'd have noticed our descent anyway. The nations of Earth are all watching each other like hawks. I wanted to take a stand, Crest. At this very moment, your

image, the image of an alien, is making its way through every computer network on the planet. Irreversibly. The many amateur com operators who picked up our unencrypted transmission will see to that. As we speak, the people down there are discovering that we're on the precipice of a new era."

Crest was about to reply, but Flipper spoke first. "Have you totally lost your minds?" The boisterous astronaut reared up, fighting against the straps and the g-force all at once. "I want to go home! I want to see Beth!"

"You will go home, Clark." Rhodan said the words slowly and imploringly. "Soon. But it won't be the same home. You might want to start getting used to that. None of the truths we've considered unshakable will apply anymore."

The *Stardust* reached the upper strata of the Earth's atmosphere. The ship shook around them, threatening to break apart.

Bull pushed the spacecraft downwards to ensure that it didn't bounce off the atmosphere like a stone skipping across a lake's surface. Uncomfortable warmth spread through the cockpit as the heat shield heated up from the friction. Bull was demanding more of the ship than its specifications allowed.

It still wasn't enough.

"Dammit!" cried the pilot when sixty kilometers still stood between them and the Earth's surface. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

"What's wrong?" Rhodan asked.

"Those idiots aren't as dumb as we thought!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they're too dumb to get that they should be welcoming us with flowers instead of missiles. *Far* too lacking in the brain department for that. But they're masters at what they *are* capable of, I'll give them that." He pounded against the radar with his fist. The swarms of dots were now at the edges of the screen. "We've given these guys the slip. They assumed our reentry maneuver would be within the *Stardust*'s performance parameters."

"And were sorely mistaken."

Bull nodded. "Exactly. Except for these few here." He zoomed in on the display. Rhodan could see a handful of points, no larger than grains of dust, moving towards the center of the screen.

"What are those?"

"No idea, to be honest. All I know is they're coming straight for us. And that's all it takes. At our speed, a collision with a golf ball

would be enough to leave nothing but a first-rate fireworks display."

"Can you shake them?"

Bull laughed. "Sure, I can try. But the *Stardust*'s no interceptor, Perry. A few upgrades can't change that."

Bull pushed the ship downwards. Now the ship was on a collision course. It looked like the ground was hurtling straight towards them. The temperature inside the cabin rose sharply from uncomfortably warm to unbearably hot.

Rhodan heard screams. Flipper, who had accused him and Bull of madness. Crest, who suddenly feared for his life despite the Arkonides' super-technology and was reeling off a series of sentences in his mother tongue, which Rhodan suspected were prayers.

"Overload!" announced the Positronic. *"Warning, overload! Impact in two minutes and fifty-five—"*

Bull shut it off.

Rhodan looked at the radar screen. It wouldn't be enough. The interceptor missiles were rapidly catching up to them, approaching even faster than the Earth's surface.

He looked at the ground below them, at the green and brown landscapes of Asia. Above those, small points were coming ever closer. The interceptor missiles. They grew larger and larger. Soon, Rhodan could make out the flames emitted by their propulsion units.

"Dammit, that's all we've got!" Bull shouted. "I can't evade them! Not without tearing the *Stardust* apart!"

Then the missiles were right in front of them. Rhodan took a deep breath. He didn't avert his gaze. He wanted to face his death with both eyes open. His vision swept past the missiles' white-lacquered bodies to their dorsal fins. He registered the flag there. The United States. And then...

Suddenly, there was light. Bolts streaked down from the sky, seeking out the missiles and causing them to explode into balls of flame.

Bull and Flipper roared, and before their cries had even faded, a shadow raced past the *Stardust*. It was shaped like a sphere with a diameter of around sixty meters. One of the *Aetron*'s auxiliary craft.

A display came to life. The image of an enchantingly beautiful woman with white hair and red eyes appeared. Thora.

“What are you waiting for?” she snapped. “Land on your beloved barbarian world before I change my mind and abandon you to your fate among the savages!”

The Arkonide cut the connection. Glowing tongues of gas shot out of the craft’s propulsion units, catapulting it back to the Moon. For a brief moment, a shining star hung in the sky. Then the ship was gone.

Reginald Bull opened his mouth to make a scathing remark, then thought better of it and silently set about bringing the *Stardust* back to Earth.

Epilogue

Rhodan set out before dawn.

By the light of the crescent moon, he ascended a creek bed where no water had flowed for a very long time. Both the stones that slid away beneath the soles of his boots and the dust that swirled up with every step were bare of any moisture and bleached by the sun. The Gobi Desert was an inhospitable place—a lunar landscape on Earth.

Lost in silent thought, he climbed higher.

After about an hour, he reached the crest. There he came to a halt and turned around. Below his feet stretched a plain that extended to the horizon. At its edge there was an irregular, dark speck, the Juyan salt lake, and at the edge of that was a point of light.

It was the *Stardust*, which Bull had set down on the plain every bit as gently as he would have done at Nevada Fields. A gleaming transparent dome rose up above the ship: a defensive shield, the absolute limit of what Thora had permitted in terms of Arkonide technology to protect Crest.

The shield's generator, including the accompanying reactor, had filled the ship's entire payload bay. Immediately after the landing, the device's modules had assembled themselves as if by magic. Crest had assured them that the shield generated would guard them against anything humans could think up.

Rhodan took a deep breath, tasted the cold, dry air, and closed his eyes. In his mind, he pictured how this desert might look one day—the sandscape turned into a city extending to the horizon. This city he envisioned was green, and its streets were filled with humans and beings from countless planets. With *life*. Between the soaring buildings, the roads were teeming with aircraft. On the horizon, an endless procession of starships launched and touched down, each even more immense than the Arkonide vessel currently stranded on the Moon.

He opened his eyes as the first rays of the rising sun hit him.

Day had broken on June 27, 2036.

Rhodan looked again at the lifeless desert, but he didn't let the picture in his mind fade away. He squinted. With his right hand, he felt around for the spot on his uniform's sleeve where the United States flag was attached. His fingers found it.

With a jerk, he ripped off the flag and let it fall into the dust without a second thought.

Then he headed back to the *Stardust*.

The stars were waiting for Perry Rhodan.

EPISODE 2: UTOPIA TERRANIA
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Christian Montillon

“Life pulls out all the stops
to keep going.”

(Éric Liberge)

1.

June 27, 2036,
The early morning hours

The deserter allowed himself a little rest. He closed his eyes, put his head back, and took a deep breath. The air was hot; their surroundings flickered.

So, this was what it felt like to be a traitor. And yet he had chosen the only possible alternative to stay true to himself.

"Perry?"

A little smile snuck onto the man's lips. "Yes, Reginald?"

"You realize it can't go on like this, don't you? We have to do something!"

Rhodan opened his eyes and looked out at the vastness of the Gobi Desert. It was a barren area, dreary and empty. Only the Juyan salt lake, which had served as a landing strip for the *Stardust*, offered some diversion next to the airfield. No doubt someone might find beauty in this scenery, which offered a bizarre uniqueness and inner peace, but right now he was not in the mood for that. Not when it felt like the fate of the entire planet was on his shoulders.

Or rather, that weight was distributed between his and his old friend Reginald Bull's shoulders. Another part of the burden was borne by the doctor Eric Manoli, but their fourth crew member, Clark Flipper, would probably not count in that respect. And neither would the last of their party that waited under this energy dome in the midst of the vastness of the desert: Crest, the Arkonide. The alien. A man from an unknown planet. So ill and weak that he could not leave his formchair on the *Stardust*. And yet he was infinitely strong with the potential to change the entire world.

Unfortunately, he was not able to employ that potential on his own strength. For that, others were needed. First, Major Perry Rhodan himself, who had taken on the responsibility for Project Stardust, and with it, responsibility for the whole world, which he

felt more and more clearly every second.

"Nothing to say?" asked Bull.

"Do you know Atlas?" returned Rhodan instead of offering a direct answer.

"The Saturnian moon? Or the star in the Pleiades?"

"Neither. Nothing astronomical, Reg."

"In that case, I still have an atlas at home from my grandfather. They've become rare but are still useful, though not as reliable and accurate as modern electronic displays."

Rhodan paused briefly before catching the misunderstanding. "No, I mean the Greek hero. Not maps in book form."

Reginald Bull ran his fingers through his stubbly red hair and grinned. It was good to see him like that, relaxed and unstressed for a moment—not the go-getter who would normally struggle to find a second's respite in a situation like this.

A situation like this. Rhodan considered the expression. The problem was that there had never *been* a situation like this before.

The moment of cheerfulness between them vanished as fast as it had come.

"Atlas," Bull repeated. "A giant who literally carried the world on his shoulders. If I'm not mistaken, he lifted up the celestial heavens at the ends of the then-known earth."

Noise distracted the two friends before he could add anything more. Clark Flipper had cried out, loudly and abruptly. He stood in front of Dr. Manoli, his right arm raised, his hand clenched into a fist. He was trembling, his face shining almost deathly pale.

Rhodan rushed over to them. Sand crunched under his feet with every step and reminded him where he was—in the middle of the Gobi Desert. In the center of bleakness. In scorching heat—even though the defensive field around them provided a different impression, creating a safe zone within their strange surroundings.

"Stay calm," he heard Dr. Manoli say. "We can't lose our nerve now!"

"Stay calm!" Clark Flipper blurted out. A tear ran down his nostril from the corner of his eye. An almost hysterical giggle spilled from his lips. "We're stuck here and...and this is all..." He lowered his arm, unclenching his fist. His gaze wandered anxiously across the ground. "I keep thinking of Beth, you know?" He turned to Rhodan. "Do you understand, Perry?"

A nod, short, curt, and pure military—that of a man who knew

what he wanted and had no time for long explanations.

"Absolutely." Rhodan thought briefly about what he should, or rather what he *had* to do. If even one of them lost their nerve, the consequences could be as disastrous as if they were still in space. Or even worse, if that were conceivable.

The corners of Flipper's mouth twitched. He kneaded his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. "Beth is lost in the Himalayas, and I have nothing better to do than risk my life, betray my country, and get stuck in the desert with a bunch of lunatics!" Although he was staring into the void, his words were clearly addressed to Rhodan, and they constituted a provocation.

But the latter could handle that; he was in charge of the mission and therefore of this small group of people. He would do everything he could to avoid escalation.

"Then listen to what one of these lunatics has to tell you."

Flipper leaned his forehead into an open palm, his fingertips massaging his scalp. Drops of sweat glistened between his hair. "I'm listening." No words of apology crossed his lips.

"You know exactly why we committed this alleged treason," Rhodan said.

"I don't see what's alleged about it."

"We're doing the right thing, Clark! Isn't that enough? Maybe not before the law, but...for all of us!" His crewmate maintained a grim silence, his lips set in a thin, colorless line on his pale face. "Tell me what you suggest!" Rhodan asked—or rather commanded.

Flipper opened his mouth, and for a moment he seemed to freeze. Then he exhaled audibly and was silent for a couple of seconds. "You want my advice?" Rhodan nodded. "We take the *Stardust* home and sort everything out."

That was exactly what Rhodan had expected to hear; the possibility had been bound to come up sooner or later. Why not right away? What mattered was to provide clarity so that they all could act together.

"It's impossible to fly home," he said harshly.

"Why?"

The word was almost snatched from Flipper's lips when something rushed towards them with a loud whistle. A sound that heralded death. Rhodan threw his head back and froze. He didn't even have time to mentally say goodbye to this life. He was as good as dead already.

An explosive missile slammed into the Arkonide defensive shield that stretched over them all, but whatever was happening up there, the men below felt nothing. No shock wave, no burning heat, no flames or shrapnel, no splashing, melting sand that ate its way into the astronauts' flesh. Only muffled noise and a reddish glow around the shield, followed by flashes of light, like sheet lightning on the distant horizon, surreally loud.

Anyone close to such an explosion should have been killed. Until that very moment such an outcome had been an irrefutable law. Now this overturned law was one of a thousand details of the new reality that awaited humanity.

When the bang trailed off, Rhodan intervened. Outwardly, he remained perfectly calm. "Why don't we fly to the United States? That's why!"

A last flicker twitched across the shield. Then only a few glowing sparks danced in the air, seemingly weightless, before they too went out. An instant later, a myriad of other explosive missiles rushed in and detonated outside and above the dome. Flames and darting flashes. Whoever had ordered this attack probably had not realized that he couldn't accomplish his goal this way. The defensive dome held.

Rhodan could well imagine the perplexity of those on the other side. Actually, he did not feel all that different himself; he could only marvel at the Arkonides' advanced technology, which exceeded even the boldest visions of human science.

To fly to the Moon in a rocket as fragile and at-risk as a raw egg in the midst of a typhoon... That was all terrestrial space technology had ever offered despite billions in funds and the power of many ingenious minds. The Arkonides, on the other hand, traveled to unknown solar systems faster than the speed of light. And Rhodan guessed that was only the tip of the iceberg. Crest, and even more so Thora, the two aliens he had gotten to know, had kept silent about the secrets of their people.

Crest... It was high time to speak with the Arkonide. The flight in the *Stardust* to Earth had taken its toll on him and further destabilized his already weakened condition.

As progressive as this star tribe may be, Rhodan thought, *its members are not immune to illness.*

How badly off Crest really was, he could only begin to fathom. The old man was still lying on the reclining chair that Thora had

installed for him. Apparently, he lacked the strength to stand.

And Thora? She remained cool and distant. But could one judge the two alien creatures by human psychology? Did they not think and act in a strange way because they originated from the evolution of a far-away solar system and thus completely different conditions from humanity?

If ways of thinking and living differed so fundamentally even between the peoples of Earth, how different must the members of a species from a planet much farther away be? Never mind how unfamiliar Americans, Asians, and Middle Easterners were to each other, not to mention tribes that lived in intentional isolation in the depths of the rainforest near the equator... Now they had contact with creatures from a distant solar system, with a completely foreign mentality and an entirely different cultural and environmental imprint.

And yet Perry Rhodan felt strongly that there was something that connected humans and Arkonides. A bond of understanding and...emotion. They were all thinking, intelligent beings who were alive. And wasn't life to be respected? Wasn't that the very reason they were connected?

"Perry?" asked Bull again, as he had done a short while before.

And again, Rhodan, the deserter, smiled. "Before you ask, I am indulging in idle thoughts, as you might call it. Let's go and see Crest. I'm curious to know how he'll assess the situation."

Bull pointed vaguely up towards the energy dome. "The shield will hold. I'm sure of that. Even if the whole world teams up and fires a thousand shells or atomic bombs."

Rhodan shook his head. "A single atomic bomb would be enough," he replied harshly. "Not to break the shield but to cause reactions across the world and unleash a nuclear chaos where we all wipe each other out. Let's hope it won't come to that."

"Hope will get us nowhere, Perry!" Bull leaned forward conspiratorially; a sunbeam reflected off his scalp, glistening with sweat, and resembled a small flame between the short red strands of hair. Then the bizarre optical effect abruptly ended. "Don't you understand? We have to act! Let's use the superior Arkonide technology and give the people out there a good dressing-down! We have to bring the world powers to their senses by demonstrating to them what..."

"Stay calm," Rhodan interrupted. "The time will come and we'll

find a way, but we can't jump the gun. This is a chance for humans to solve their problems...even if they don't know it yet!"

"But the people in power don't want to know," Bull declared, convinced. "You'd have to beat it into them."

Dr. Eric Manoli, who was standing silently beside them in the shadow of the *Stardust*, nodded in assent. Clark Flipper was sitting on the ground a short distance away, his chin resting in his hands.

Rhodan slowly let his gaze wander across his three companions. An important and dangerous mission had brought them together and placed them in this position; now the question was who would cope with this extreme endurance test and who would fail. The answer seemed obvious, but one could by no means give up on Clark Flipper. He was an astronaut, just like the others, and had gone through a thousand trials. But even a strong personality could break when the pressure was too high.

"All of this ultimately forms our gateway to the stars," Rhodan stated. "The Arkonides, the events on the Moon, the encounter with Crest and Thora, and it's happening right now, of all times, when the Earth resembles a powder keg that's already burning on both ends! This is no coincidence!"

"Our big chance, huh?" Flipper shouted to them. "Peace for all? Lofty words and grand plans! But how do you intend to put them into practice?"

Rhodan remained silent. He kept his cards close to his chest.

"We'll have to wait." His tone brooked no contradictions. "No matter what you think of the situation, we probably agree on one thing: this is a historic moment. We're living in exciting times that will change everything. The only question is what direction we're heading in!"

"I'm ready to follow you," Bull said. "I trust you."

Rhodan didn't let on how much relief his old friend's words brought him. Of course, Bull knew just how important his support was—he had chosen his moment deliberately, and Rhodan could only congratulate him on his tactfulness.

"I, too, trust you," Manoli added.

Clark Flipper kept silent.

At least he doesn't disagree, Rhodan thought. But didn't his silence amount to an objection?

"I'm going to see Crest," he announced. "There's a lot to discuss."

With that, he considered the discussion over. Taking long strides, he approached the entrance of the spacecraft. His gaze flashed briefly past the capsule and towards the seemingly endless desert. But he saw not only the bleak infinity that threatened to fill him with pessimism; a potential that went far beyond what most might see in such an environment was clear to him.

He felt a whiff of cosmic expanse—a breath of the future.

Splinter of Development (1)

Anonymous Internet blog *Alien Facers*:

Official government assessment of the unknown writer: harmless conspiracy theorist. Less than five thousand readers per month. Blocked and deleted by the upcoming censorship measures nevertheless, although similar entries went unnoticed for years.

The following post dates from June 21, 2036. After its deletion, it appeared on more than a hundred places across the Internet. By the time the *Stardust* landed in the Gobi Desert, the text had been accessed by these secondary sources a total of 8,003,065 times:

"Life pulls out all the stops to keep going."

I don't recall where I first read that sentence, but it is exactly right. In these times, at the end of June 2036, it's more true than ever. At least more than our modern civilization has yet recorded in its mendacious writing of history.

We see ourselves as the pride of a development spanning millions of years. Later historians will laugh about it. These are dark times no matter how much the official media might conceal it. A world war threatens to destroy us all.

No, I have to put it another way. We, all the people of the world, are threatening to destroy each other by unleashing a world war. That corresponds more with the facts, although the difference might be a philosophical one.

But how did I write it above? *Life pulls out all the stops to keep going.*

That's exactly what's happening these days. Because what's happening up there, *out* there, is nothing but a necessary development.

Laugh at me all you like; mock me for as long as you want. I stand by what I'm saying: everything needs to happen this way. Humanity has reached a breaking point; therefore life has to look for a new way to overcome this crisis.

There are aliens out there; that much is incontestable, and the

time when they'll make contact is getting closer and closer. I've been writing this for years. Everything has been building up to it for a long time.

Mysterious mechanisms operate and take care of the survival of intelligence in the universe. Many still call these effective forces "evolution"—an outdated model that urgently needs to be redefined. It takes into account far too few factors.

The signs are obvious. Just look. Look up into the stars. Look around!

2.

June 27, 2036,
A few hours after the Stardust *landed in the Gobi Desert*

The window offered an almost unobstructed view of the landscape. The sun was glistening on the South China Sea, while the Macanese around General Bai Jun were losing money.

A lot of money.

At the casino, day after day and night after night, enough of it disappeared to reconstruct one of the slums from scratch and feed its residents for a month. But the state never saw any of that cash; it simply trickled away.

Bai Jun leaned back in his armchair at the gambling table.

"Mister," the Macanese croupier said, "don't you want to conti__"

"I will choose to pause this round."

The croupier nodded eagerly. "Certainly."

Creep, the general thought. But such was the nature of a lackey. An easy, simple existence.

While Bai Jun pretended to watch the many small boats in the harbor, he analyzed his fellow players. His opponents. A lot of money was at stake...and even more than that.

"Interesting, isn't it?" a bright female voice asked. She tried to sound smokey, as if there were a Southern fire in her, but didn't succeed in hiding the Eastern coolness.

Bai Jun turned around. The back of the armchair creaked softly. "Why are you pretending?" he asked. "A woman like you doesn't need to pretend to be something she isn't."

She wore a skin-tight dress. The red fabric (silk, the general guessed) had dark leather straps all over it. They stretched just above her nipples. Her black hair hung over her eyebrows in perfectly straight bangs. Her eyelashes shimmered golden.

"Why do you think I'd play anything? It's not my nature."

"That's why you like to hang out at the Macau casino, then?"

Bai Jun laughed roaringly, and several bystanders joined in. The croupier showed a light, barely perceptible smile.

The woman seemed amused as well. Her blood-red made-up lips glistened, and she showed her ivory-white teeth. “There are many kinds of games. I use very different weapons from these people here who sometimes win, yet more often lose.”

Slender fingers with long nails gently stroked Bai Jun’s cheeks.

“We should go to a séparée,” the general suggested.

A glance at the croupier was enough. The Macanese set up a reservation through his seat’s display. “Number eight,” he said a moment later.

“Good,” the woman replied in Patuá, a language native to Macau that had been almost extinct for a decade, squelched by High Chinese.

Bai Jun nodded. She could think what she wanted. He could have followed a lecture in Patuá because he was always well-prepared for his assignments. His gambling at the casino was an insignificant side effect; he had only come for this woman who was known by many names. She dealt in something far more valuable than money: information. Not even Bai Jun had managed to uncover her true identity.

He left the gambling table. The numerous casino patrons made way for him. With each step he sank a little into the plush carpet. At a small bar, sparkling wine bubbled in glasses.

Bai Jun did not turn around. He knew the stranger was following him because he had what she wanted. And he paid well. He opened the door to the séparée marked with the number eight. Every minute of its use cost a fortune. The casino’s management liked to emphasize that the rooms were absolutely tap-proof and perfectly shielded. No word that was spoken within would ever get out.

That was not enough for him. He activated a tiny interference transmitter that was covered by a layer of fake skin within his armpit. The hiding place looked entirely real and had never been discovered. One could not be too careful when dealing with the fate of a country and the great mission of bringing it home.

The stranger closed the door behind her. A soft whiz sounded. “I have what you want.”

“Do you?”

She reached towards her left breast and pulled aside one of the

leather straps. Underneath was a small pocket from which she drew an even smaller piece of paper.

"An alluring hiding place," the general commented. He did not, however, grant the woman's charms one look. Instead he watched her every move like a hawk. If she showed the slightest hint of trying to deceive him, she would die a second later.

She handed him the paper.

"As simple as that?" he asked.

"The words on it are worthless without the information key, which can be found in only one place in the world." She tapped her temple. "Here."

"And what else?"

"Do you have the pod?"

"Of course." Bai Jun pulled the portable mini computer from his jacket pocket, just as she had requested beforehand.

The stranger took it. "When the payment has reached my account, I'll tell you the key. Should anybody listen in on us, they won't be able to do anything with it because they don't have this." She pointed to the paper in his hand. "Then I will destroy the pod." A subtle smile made her eyes shine. On the bridge of her nose a small spot was dancing. "Put it on your government's tab."

The general did not let on how uncomfortable he suddenly felt. She was going far out on a limb, moving within realms that were none of her business. He remained silent.

She smiled even more broadly. "Don't be afraid. I couldn't care less about the true reasons for your stay in Macau. My job is information, nothing more."

"Are you going to stay in the city?"

"Neither in the city nor in the countryside. Once I have destroyed the pod, I will immediately board a plane and leave this place far behind." She stepped closer, stroking his cheek again. "Don't forget, my job is always to be well-informed. Besides, I like to survive."

Reluctantly, the general had to admit that she had set everything up perfectly. She knew exactly why he was in Macau. Officially, he was recovering in the city and gambling the night away purely for pleasure. In truth, he had been entrusted with an assignment of the highest importance. From here, he was going to prepare to bring Taiwan home. To that end, he had spun a secret underground web long ago, and now in a few hours a call from this

woman would give him the crucial piece of the puzzle.

He grabbed her hand more roughly than was necessary, squeezed it for an instant, then blew a kiss onto it.

Her face remained motionless. “Quite the gentleman.”

“You are using an English term for me, of all things?” Bai Jun laughed mockingly. “Should I have overestimated you that much?”

She withdrew her hand. “So long,” she said, turning around and opening the door of the séparée. She did not seem to think it necessary to bring up the subject of her payment again.

In fact, it was not necessary. Bai Jun looked at his watch. As he had not given any contrary instructions, the money had been on its way for exactly three minutes.

He followed her into the public areas of the casino. When he closed the door from the outside, the usage fee was deducted from his in-house credit down to the second. It did not matter; he had won tens of thousands over the last few hours.

Back at the gambling table, he exchanged a glance with his adjutant, He Jian-Dong. The latter raised his left eyebrow, barely noticeably, by all appearances just a gambler like everyone else. Nobody knew they were together.

“The four,” the croupier announced just then. “And the eight. Followed by the fifteen.”

Three numbers were known. According to the rules of the trade game, new bets could now be made. He Jian-Dong had prepared everything and now gave the general the agreed-upon signal.

A murmur rose as Bai Jun put a chip worth thirty thousand units on the field with the sixteen.

“But...” the croupier began.

“Is the bank considering a withdrawal?” the general asked, putting another ten thousand on the twenty-three.

The Macanese master of ceremonies did not hesitate for a second. “Of course not.”

He Jian-Dong threw a thousand on the forty-two. He paid no attention to the other players’ bets. Their game of observation and deception was too perfect; the general and his adjutant had rehearsed it well over the last few years. No casino had yet been able to prove their fraud.

Everyone revealed their cards.

“Sixteen,” announced the croupier. “Twenty-three.” His face turned a little paler. The house was losing a fortune. “And forty-

two."

He Jian-Dong laughed as if he hadn't known the exact results beforehand. The two winners received their high-value chips.

"You are an even luckier winner than I am," He Jian-Dong addressed him, as if speaking to a stranger.

Bai Jun stopped short. Establishing contact before leaving the casino was highly irregular. However, He Jian-Dong was a competent soldier and associate; he had to have had a good reason for his unusual behavior.

"Only risk brings about victory," he replied.

His adjutant bowed slightly and slipped him a note. The general read the two words written on it. *Leave casino*.

He Jian-Dong, seemingly satisfied with the outcome of the game, walked over to the cash register to trade in his chips. The general waited an appropriate length of time, accepted congratulations, politely took his leave, and then followed his adjutant. Something important had to have happened, and only minutes before the completion of the crucial part of his mission.

He glanced at the clock over the exit. The money would arrive in his informant's account any moment, and she was probably watching the state of her finances closely. She would contact him via the pod shortly.

Bai Jun retrieved his winnings, took ten percent of it in cash, and gave it to the attendant, who stared at his very generous tip incredulously. The general then had the balance transferred to his account in the neutral financial enclave of Japan.

Outside the building, He Jian-Dong awaited him on a pier that reached far out into the bay. The horseshoe-shaped casino cast a dark shadow on the water.

The general looked out at the teeming mass of bridges and houseboats lashed together. Only a small part of the harbor had been cleared for settlement—a concession by the Macau government. In this floating city, the black market and drug trade flourished, just like cheap prostitution, so that many casino winners could promptly squander their money. Quite a few fell sick while doing so or disappeared forever in the floods beneath this "second commune," as it was commonly called. In Bai Jun's eyes, this was the true gambling ground of Macau, with the stakes being survival.

"I have received a message," He Jian-Dong stated, tapping his ear, which contained an implanted radio receiver through which he

was permanently connected to the network.

"An order?"

"An even more important mission," his adjutant answered. "The invasion of Taiwan is being canceled until further notice."

"So, they are sending me to the Gobi."

He Jian-Dong stared at him, puzzled. "Just how..."

"Where else would I be needed right now? Of course they are sending me to the landing site of the *Stardust* and this alien."

General Bai Jun watched a fat whore push her way out of the cheap tin structure of a houseboat. Her left breast was bare, a welt across it. How he would enjoy leaving all this behind...

"Let's go!" he said.

Splinter of Development (2)

Professor Dr. Hermann Langke, Chair of Social Competence and Viral Network Marketing at New York University, during his lecture, two days before the *Stardust* landed in the Gobi Desert:

"Just take the example of this Internet blog (I am showing you a cached image here). Currently, you won't be able to find it online. You will undoubtedly recognize the staggering non-professionalism right away from the design of the title characters. *Alien Facers*. An uninspired name for an amateur blog with conspiracy theory contents, just like many others.

"Irrelevant. At least until recently. The very fact that I mention it in my lecture singles it out from the meaningless nonsense."

(A perfectly timed pause for student laughter).

"So, why am I telling you about it? Well, that's easy. It was deleted by...let me name it, the undesirable word we could discuss at length if we only wanted to. It was deleted due to *censorship*. Before that, hardly anyone even noticed this blog. Now the Internet is full of text excerpts from this one anonymous author. There are clear signs already that he is being transformed into a martyr.

"An effect of the censorship? Yes and no. There are many factors at play that make for a unique situation. The most important of these external factors is undoubtedly the return of the *Stardust* from its Moon mission. I don't have to tell you anything about the coverage or the lack of details in the midst of the modern and free journalism we know all about.

"Typical of this type of blog is its claim to factuality without mentioning any sources. Often smiled at, but still to be taken seriously? That is a question that has been asked for several decades and is more important than ever today.

"What, ladies and gentlemen, would happen if I stood before you in my capacity as an honorable professor of this university and declared that I knew exactly what was happening out there in the Gobi? If I told you that I have sources that prove this is all related

to the actual establishment of alien contact? That there are, in fact, already aliens in our solar system? Then what?”

3.

Two days before the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

Allan Mercant pulled the handbrake, closed his eyes, and leaned his forehead against the steering wheel. His skin touched plastic; it felt cool and invigorating. His hands trembled slightly as he tried to relax.

Everything's good, he thought to himself. *Everything's good.*

That mantra included only one minor flaw: it was not true. Nothing was good. It was raining, an extremely rare occurrence in bone-dry Nevada. Thick drops ran down the windshield. Dark clouds piled up in the sky. The pattering on the car roof made one feel it was the end of the world.

Not a bad alternative, thought Mercant, the refugee. A proper armageddon that erased everything with a sensational bang did not seem as bad to him as it had a couple of days ago.

Angry with himself, he pushed these fatalistic thoughts aside, got up, and opened his eyes again. Before him, a figure was running through the rain, holding the hood of a cheap-looking coat in both hands. For a moment he stared through the windshield at the passerby. It was a young woman, her eyes half-squinted, face distorted. Then the stranger disappeared into the lobby of the run-down motel.

This is how everyone runs away in their own fashion, from their own personal enemies, Mercant mused. *She from the rain, and I from...*

What was he actually running from? His state? The police? Homeland Security (the agency with the most power in the United States)? Everyone?

That last option was probably the most accurate one, as bitter as it might have been. After all, he was not a criminal, not a terrorist who might have deserved such a fate. Things had simply gotten out of hand. He had drifted further and further away from Homeland Security, until...

The short man uttered a curse, opened the car door, and

jumped out into the parking lot, which seemed to be entirely made up of puddles. Water splashed, running into his shoes. He hardly noticed, as within only a few moments he was as wet as if he had taken a shower while fully clothed.

At least it distracted him from his idle thoughts. After all, he had constantly been analyzing his situation ever since Lesly Pounder, NASA's Flight Director, had helped him to escape after Homeland Security had arrested him. Because he, Allan D. Mercant, was a traitor who had colluded with Beijing and Great Russia to sabotage the missile defenses of all major nations. To prevent a world war that would devastate them all. To prevent an atomic bomb from exploding on the Moon and destroying an alien spaceship.

Yes, he was a traitor. But he would do it again any time. Because in contrast to his allies Li De and Officer Medvenkov, he was still alive. The other two had been executed by the rulers of their respective countries, and he probably would have been treated no differently if Pounder had not helped him. Without a doubt, he was one of those cases where Homeland Security would have shown no mercy.

As he hurried across the gravel parking lot, the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun minutes before. A last drop slapped the back of his neck, and everything abruptly went quiet, only the soft sound of water gurgling from the roof of the shabby hotel into a gutter full of holes.

Mercant opened the door of the motel. Behind the reception desk, a pimply boy who probably wasn't even twenty yet grinned at him.

"Would've been better if you'd waited another minute in your car, right?" the young man mumbled. He wore a greasy T-shirt with black chest hair growing out past the neckline.

Mercant let his gaze wander around the room and saw the young woman disappear on the upper floor landing. Moist footprints glistened on the steps.

"Good advice," he replied, as if the boy's mumbling had been a revelation of intelligence and wisdom.

"That was for free. Need a room?"

"Coffee."

"We don't have any..."

Without a word, Mercant slammed a five-dollar bill onto the

counter. The kid stared at it as if it were a difficult math problem: on one side of the rule of three, money and the obvious will to possess it; on the other, the desire for a drink; now assign the variables.

"But a clean cup, please."

An untidy hand with long fingernails grabbed the bill. "Normally we don't sell coffee. But I'll make an exception for you. Wait a minute."

Mercant watched the greasy T-shirt and its owner disappear behind a dirty curtain. Soon after, dishes clattered and a coffee machine began to wheeze.

He thought about what his next steps would have to be. He had been able to escape from the spaceport Nevada Fields. Now the Secret Service was hunting him, and if anybody knew how seriously that had to be taken, it was him. After all, he had been part of it for three years himself, and it was right in the Homeland Security sphere that he had worked in for a long time.

He could hardly concentrate. Exhaustion washed away every clear thought. However, one thing was obvious to him: he was not yet far enough away from Nevada Fields. Then again, there was probably no safe place for him left in the world. Besides, the escape car was a problem. Sooner or later, Homeland Security agents would find something leading to the vehicle. He did not by any means underestimate his former colleagues. So he had to get rid of the car. But continuing on foot didn't seem like a good idea either.

Mr. Greasy Shirt returned and put down a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, it was anything but clean. Mercant briefly scrunched up his face and took a sip. Hot, bitter, and strong.

"What'll it be?" the guy asked. "Do you want a room or not?"

"For an hour," Mercant replied. He could not allow himself more than that, but he longed for a bed, at least for a few minutes.

"We're not that kind of place," the attendant responded, suddenly speaking very clearly. Maybe he was afraid that he was dealing with an undercover cop. "No whores in the room, okay?"

Mercant took another sip. "Do you see one anywhere around here?"

"No, and I don't have any available, so no need asking." He did not quite seem to have mastered the choice of words and correct pronunciations after all.

"A room for one hour, just for me, all right?"

“That’s twenty dollars.”

The price was way too high for such a dump, but at that moment he simply didn’t care.

“Okay.” He dug out another bill, silently thanking Lesly Pounder for slipping him a few bucks, and handed it across the counter.

“If you would please fill out the registration form...”

“No need,” Mercant replied, emptying his cup.

“But we have to...”

“No need. After all, I am not staying the night, just an hour.”

“All right, Mr....”

“Smith.”

Even this young man, who had seemingly been born with the intelligence of a bottle of liquid soap, understood that.

“Okay, Mr. Smith,” he answered with exaggerated emphasis.

“Wake me up in an hour.”

Mercant did not wait for a confirmation. He took the key, went up to the second floor, found the right room, dropped onto the bed, and fell asleep immediately.

He floated in space towards the sun, and he was cold.

Until there was a knock.

The constant rapping startled him out of his sleep.

“Hey, get up! Otherwise it’ll cost extra!”

Allan Mercant immediately returned to consciousness.

“All right, I’ll be gone in a minute!”

He pushed the blanket aside, swung his legs out of the bed, and stood up. The brief rest had done him good, but he wondered if he had made a mistake. Wasn’t it careless to be staying at this motel? After all, his getaway vehicle was still in the parking lot. Perhaps some Homeland Security agents were already waiting outside his door with their guns drawn while the guy in the greasy shirt trembled with both fear and excitement at the prospect of getting a good show.

The scenario was not entirely unlikely; Mercant had been on the other side of such a mission more than once.

“Hey,” he shouted, “get me another coffee, will you?”

“Sure,” came the reply from outside.

He went into the bathroom, a tiny cubbyhole that was less than clean, as expected. He had not glanced inside before his brief sleep. In the sink, dark stains were gleaming, the floor glistened wetly,

and three rolled-up, used condoms were stuck in the open trash can.

Mercant pushed the window up and leaned out. It faced out the back of the motel to a narrow path in front of a head-high wall. Trash bags were piled up on the cracked asphalt.

He climbed onto the narrow window sill, estimated the distance, and jumped. He landed on the wall perfectly, flailing his arms to steady himself, then ducked down and hopped onto the ground between the trash bags. Such stunts had been easier for him in the past than they were nowadays.

He walked by the house to the parking lot where only his and the young woman's cars were parked. Things looked good. Maybe his little razzle-dazzle had been unnecessary after all.

It didn't matter. He pulled the key out of his pocket, ran to his car, and took the spare gas canister out of the trunk. Then he walked on.

"Hey!" he heard from behind him. "What about the coffee?"

Mercant turned around. It was just the kid. No agents.

"You drink it!"

He didn't wait to listen any longer, hurrying to the road and looking back in the direction he had come from. He wanted to try his luck at hitchhiking.

He began marching off, farther away from Nevada Fields. It took five minutes for the first car to arrive. Mercant waved, the spare canister in his other hand. A blazing red Plymouth raced by. He didn't worry. He knew that very few people would stop.

Three more cars roared past him before he heard the pneumatic groan of a giga truck's brakes. The colossus with three trailers rumbled to the side of the road, and the window on the front passenger side stopped right in front of his head. The engine went off with a rattle.

A woman leaned towards him from the driver's side, and she didn't look anything like Allan had expected. She wore overalls, a work suit, but she was not at all the manly type one would imagine behind the wheel of such a truck.

"Where to?"

He raised the spare canister. "The closest gas station."

"That's a number of miles, shorty."

For a moment, Mercant froze inside; he didn't like references to his stature. Yet there was something in the trucker's voice that seemed to suggest she wasn't making fun of him. No mockery

resonated in her words; rather, there was a dry friendliness that suited her appealing looks.

"Never mind." He grinned. "At least if you don't mind, Mrs...."

"Tulodziecki." She smiled as well, freckles dancing on her nose. "But 'Mrs. Tulodziecki' was my mother until she died. Or maybe she's still around. Haven't seen her in a long time. I'm Iga. Or 'Wonderbra.'"

Mercant couldn't stop his gaze from wandering to Iga's chest at those words. The overalls' fabric stretched over full breasts.

She grinned even wider. "And?"

"You don't need a Wonderbra. Or it already fits perfectly."

"Which would you prefer?"

There was a click, and the passenger door swung to the side. Allan saw Iga pulling her hand from the control console. There were remnants of lube oil on it.

"I would prefer it if you could take me with you to the closest gas station."

She nodded.

"I'm Allan," he continued. His first name was innocuous. He certainly would not mention his last name. "Iga?"

"Get in, then."

He leaped into the passenger seat. The interior of the truck smelled like lemon mixed with a distinctive aroma: sweet wine. He felt slightly uneasy, but Iga didn't seem like she was drunk.

He set the canister between his feet. The leg space was generous enough and offered a lot of room. Iga steered the truck back onto the road.

"A fifty-tonner?" Mercant asked.

"Sixty," she replied. "I always go for the maximum. That's just who I am."

"If that's an allusion to my..."

"With machines, Allan. When it comes to people, I apply very different standards."

"How am I supposed to interpret that?"

"Why do you want to know? I'm a trucker. Ask me something about the road, about my truck, or about the goddamn goods I transport all across our beloved country. I can tell you all about that, but not about philosophy. If this even *is* philosophy." Her laughter had a bell-like sound. "But you can't ask me that either."

Mercant started to feel more comfortable in her presence. He

could almost—but only almost—forget that the U.S. intelligence elite was on his heels. He wondered what the mission commander's orders were by now. Did they want to arrest him again? Or just put a bullet between his eyes? His status was...

"Hey, Allan!"

Her words jolted him out of his thoughts. "Iga?"

"Maybe you're not aware of this, but when a trucker picks up a hitchhiker, they expect something in return. Shouldn't be a problem—a conversation. It's something different from talking with your colleagues on the radio, you know? Our job is lonely." She flashed him a brief glance, her eyes as dark as a fir forest.

"They're almost as black as the pupils," he noted.

"What?"

"Your irises."

She laughed. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Why do you want to know?" he asked, repeating her question from before. "Philosophy is not my thing. If this even is philosophy."

"Well, I knew it wasn't a mistake to bring you along. I saw it on your face right away. You seem familiar somehow."

"I have a generic face," he suggested, although admittedly, no one had ever told him that.

With a click, the radio came on. "It's eight a.m.," said a hollow voice accompanied by a jingle that Allan had never heard before. "Time for the news from around the world. No good news, as it were. Freaking crap, but only disasters get good ratings."

"I don't know any station that tells it like it is quite on that level."

Iga smiled, and the skin over her nose curled. Again, the freckles were dancing across her light complexion. Her straight ginger hair was only centimeters long. Involuntarily, Mercant wondered whether the color was authentic.

"That's the trucker channel," she explained. "We like it because it's honest. Of course, it's made by us."

"And?"

She turned down the volume. "And what? We're truckers. We don't sugarcoat anything. We stick together. We're a..."

"Family?" Allan interrupted. "Isn't that a little exaggerated?"

Iga braked but didn't stop. The motel with the suspicious getaway car was several miles back now. Only a couple of cars had

come their way since.

"I won't let my family be insulted. Do you want to get out?"

He shook his head. "The next gas station is waiting, remember?"

She threw a glance at the canister between his feet. "The gas station, sure."

"Why don't you look at the road again?"

"Do you want to tell me how to drive?"

"Sorry," Mercant said apologetically.

"I forgive you. You know, that's just how we truckers are."

"That's nice for you."

"For both of us. As long as you're sitting inside Steph, you're with me. So you're one of us too."

"Steph?"

"The truck," she explained, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for the sixty-tonner to have its own name. Then again, maybe it was.

Before he could say anything else, Iga braked again. The reason why was unmistakable, and Mercant didn't like the look of it at all. The sight wouldn't have appealed to any fugitive.

A police blockade was barricading the road ahead.

"What... What's happening there?"

"Nervous, Allan?"

Something in her voice told him that she was not surprised, and he was annoyed that it was so apparent. Where had his professionalism gone? He was behaving like a total rookie!

"No. Why should I be?" he lied.

"The blocks are business as usual since that *Stardust* set out for the Moon. The other truckers told me about it already. But it's a mystery to me what a rocket up in space has to do with roadblocks down here."

"Same," Mercant asserted. "Strange to me too..."

Iga drove slowly and passed the block unchecked.

"So, 'Wonderbra,'" Mercant commented to change the subject. "That's how you introduced yourself. Strange name."

"You think so? Everyone calls me that. But it actually doesn't come from...these." She briefly took both hands off the wheel and pointed to her breasts. "Or maybe it does, somehow, at least partially. It is the slightly modified short form of Wonder Bride."

The matter-of-factness with which Iga talked about it impressed

him. Obviously, she knew exactly how she appeared and what her allure was.

"But back to you, Allan." He liked that a lot less. "Who are you?"

"You know my name."

"Half of it."

"I don't have a nickname as inventive as yours. And apart from that, my life is rather boring."

"You're lying."

While he was still trying to think of a suitable answer, he noticed the neon signs of a gas station only a few dozen meters ahead of them. The road was straight and flat, and there was no more hint of rain. The view stretched far into the distance.

"A gas station," he observed unnecessarily. "Thank you for the ride, Wonderbra. If I may call you that."

"You may," she said, "if you tell me who you are."

Mercant sensed that she had become suspicious. Her sensitivity in dealing with other people was amazing. And although it had probably dawned on her that something wasn't right about him, she showed no sign of fear.

"It's not worthwhile talking about me for much longer."

He pointed out the window to the gas station. But Iga did not slow down; on the contrary, she sped up.

"What are you doing?" he asked. A moment later, he was looking into the muzzle of a handgun.

"Who are you, Allan?" She calmly looked at the road and drove fast, but the gun was aimed straight at his head. "And don't you think I have to look at you to cancel your ticket. What do you have to hide?"

He feigned ignorance. "What makes you think I'm hiding something?" At the same time, he was wondering how he could overpower her. But to attack the driver while they were in motion seemed like an exceptionally stupid idea. By now, the speedometer was indicating that they were going nearly ninety miles per hour. The truck was tearing along the asphalt.

Iga looked away from the road, right into her passenger's eyes. "Just to reassure you: I have put on the auto-pilot. Steph will stay in the lane."

"Unfortunately, your gun is less reassuring. But once again, Iga, what makes you think I have anything to hide?"

“Very simple.” The muzzle lurched closer. From only a few centimeters away, it seemed to stare at its victim sneeringly. “You want me to take you to the closest gas station? People like that usually carry an empty canister with them, not a full one. So, Allan, you should speak up.”

Her finger tightened around the trigger.

Splinter of Development (3)

Announcement for all students in the Social Skills and Viral Network Marketing program on June 25, 2036, sent while Allan Mercant was looking into the muzzle of trucker Iga Tulodziecki's handgun:

Professor Dr. Hermann Langke's courses are canceled until further notice. We will let you know when Professor Langke will resume teaching.

4.

June 27, 2036,
Twelve hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

The military plane reached Hohhot Airport. It was rough and bumpy, but General Bai Jun only vaguely noticed that; he had already landed in a hundred far worse airplanes on a thousand more miserable runways.

Before the engine came to a rest, he unfastened his seatbelt, got up, and hurried with firm, confident steps down the narrow aisle. He Jian-Dong followed him. He was someone Bai Jun could rely on; one of the constants in his life that provided stability.

The two men left the plane via a cheap ramp as soon as it came to a standstill. Eight others remained, also high-ranking members of the military, who had been transported by the state on this special flight.

Bai Jun barely looked at them. They didn't interest him. Nothing interested him anymore except for his current mission. He felt that this would be the best job of his life. The crowning glory. The highlight. His contribution to history, compared to which the invasion of Taiwan seemed like a flyspeck on the helmet of a common soldier.

Heat hit him when he stepped outside. The sun burned mercilessly in the sky and all but boiled the asphalt. The air was wafting past. There was no comparison with the pleasantly tempered casino in Macau, just as his new mission could not be compared to the old one.

The general was wearing his uniform, which was totally unsuitable for the heat. He found himself immediately drenched in sweat. His only reaction to this consisted of adjusting his cap. At the side of his stubbly short hair, drops of perspiration formed. His expression remained motionless. On a nearby runway, another machine landed.

Hohhot. The city did not trigger pleasant memories. As a young

man, at the beginning of his short career in the secret service, before he had gone to the military, he had blown the whistle on an opponent of the Chinese state. Killing the man had been a waltz and had posed no problem either when he drew the knife across his enemy's throat or any time afterwards. But the surrounding circumstances had given him nightmares for years.

There had been a woman with the victim, a young thing, actually still a girl. One of those failures who hired themselves out as whores as soon as they reached sexual maturity. And often even earlier than that. She had witnessed everything. Bai Jun had had no choice but to execute her as well. Life would not have had anything in store for her besides humiliation, pain, and the greed of strange men—but in the moment of her death, she had looked at him with wide eyes, opened her mouth, and whispered one word. Not a plea for mercy, not a sound of distress, only a single small word: Mom.

There were moments when General Bai Jun still heard it.

"Where is the helicopter?" he shouted against the noise of the airplane taxiing to a standstill nearby.

He Jian-Dong knew, as always. "Follow me!" he ordered and rushed forward.

Damn Hohhot. It stank, and the landing field had seen better days. But this metropolis just so happened to have the nearest airport to the location where the *Stardust* had landed. The old Mongolian name meant "blue city," but the translation to Chinese had allowed for other colors as well. They called it "the green city."

A new name might be needed soon, the general thought, if a fight developed from the *Stardust* situation. If he, Bai Jun, could not stop this disaster in its tracks, a lot of blood would be spilled, and Hohhot would inevitably become "the red city."

Before long, he and He Jian-Dong were soaring into the air in a helicopter that rushed over the buildings towards the edge of the desert. Way down below, from the street canyons, Bai Jun thought he could hear a girl calling for her mother.

The monotonous rattle of the rotor blades was the only sound he could hear. Bai Jun stared through the window down at the ground. Little earbuds were plugged into his ears and suggested to his adjutant that the general was once again indulging in classical ritual monk chanting in order to boost his concentration. But Bai Jun had not even started the playback.

The dismal expanse of the desert passed by below them, and the general thought about what his first steps at the landing site of the *Stardust* would be. He reviewed all the known facts he had read up on during the flight to Hohhot. Many things were clear, and he did not doubt the existence of an energy-based protective dome over the spacecraft. Others saw this as a danger, but in his eyes, the extraterrestrial technology gave the whole thing a special charm.

The greatest variable was the astronaut under the protective dome who had claimed responsibility for the incident. History-maker, thought Bai Jun. Isn't that what Americans called people who were in the right place at the right time? In that sense, this Perry Rhodan was undoubtedly a history-maker. He, and only he, was Bai Jun's true adversary.

He had studied the astronaut's psychogram. Rhodan believed in the good in people in an almost unshakable and ridiculous way. He had attracted special attention when he'd unconventionally saved the crew of an interplanetary shuttle from crashing. Since then, NASA had called him the "instantaneous adapter."

These were the cornerstones of Rhodan's character: swift, consequent action combined with ethical and moral considerations. That was the strength of his opponent, and at the same time also his weakness, because it limited Rhodan and his possibilities. And Bai Jun would not allow himself to be restricted by such limitations, which elevated him above the other.

The general rubbed his chin. Short, almost imperceptible stubble scratched his fingertips. The window in front of his eyes vibrated slightly from the rapid flight. Below them, the first vehicles appeared in the desert, driving on the few passably built tracks that cut through the expanse. Entire military convoys blocked the roads leading to the spacecraft's landing site, the place that was increasingly attracting the attention of the whole world. Soon there would be no other topic, especially if Bai Jun's plan bore fruit.

All around the vessel a parade was taking place. Numerous troops were being deployed there. The invasion of the Chinese military assumed enormous proportions. The Mongolian units, however, remained insignificant. Bai Jun's people had long been waiting for an occasion to annex Mongolia and had therefore stationed large contingents in the Gobi—a proof of the wise foresight of the Chinese.

The commanders of these troops were surpassing each other in

their fervor to lead a successful attack. Except that a successful attack was impossible under the circumstances. In the distance, the defensive shield appeared in Bai Jun's vision, from which the artillery fire was deflected without effect. The general was surprised by this when he first saw it, but he quickly accepted it as fact.

"Fools," he groaned, uttering his first word in some time. He removed the earbuds. "Get me a list of all the officers who ordered the active attack."

He Jian-Dong acknowledged the request.

"Then make sure they are all pulled out and demoted," the general continued. "My being ordered here was overdue. Rhodan has to be fought by very different means."

"Of course." His adjutant's fingers dashed across the input field of his mini computer.

The helicopter flew over the last arriving convoys and descended near the energy dome. As soon as it landed, Bai Jun jumped out of the machine and ran on without pulling in his head, as many instinctively did under the dashing rotor blades. He knew they were high enough not to hurt him.

While moving forward, he barked orders into a radio set and established himself as the new commander-in-chief of the Chinese mission "Stardust." He did not exchange a single word with the high-ranking people on site; his adjutant took care of them and saw to it that they disappeared so as not to obstruct him any longer with their foolish and clumsy behavior.

Bai Jun's first official acts consisted of stopping the ineffective artillery fire and directing their troops to a distance of a solid mile from the protective dome. A zone of quiet soon replaced the chaos, and with it the basis for a truly constructive cooperation.

"What now?" He Jian-Dong asked.

Bai Jun looked at him. A cool, expressionless smile played across his lips. "We go for a walk."

Bai Jun didn't know where the wind was coming from. Maybe the protective dome broke the rising heat from the desert sand and mixed up the air layers. Maybe it was a perfectly normal phenomenon.

The two officers stood on a hill, which offered a perfect view of the place that had, in a bizarre way, become the true center of the world.

“There are only two possibilities,” the general told his adjutant. He Jian-Dong waited in silence. “Either everything ends here or the future begins.” Bai Jun intertwined his fingers. “Our way or the Americans’ way.” He uttered the last two words mockingly and with disdain. “Let’s make sure the right thing happens here. Only one thing is clear, He Jian-Dong: nothing will remain as it is, even if out there...” he made a comprehensive hand gesture, “countless naive fools don’t yet know that the old times have irreversibly passed.”

The *Stardust*, under its transparent protective dome, offered a surreal view. The grounded vessel was almost tiny without its precursors, which had been burned and discarded in space. It was a glistening piece of metal, smaller than an apartment and at least twice as fragile. It didn’t fit here in the desert, in this hostile place of silent eternity, and it seemed as if it could be crushed by a single hand movement, a single short order, and a single, everyday explosion.

But the *Stardust* had long since proven the opposite.

He Jian-Dong murmured a confirmation and, at the buzzing sound of an incoming message, checked his computer.

“News of the preparations in Macau,” he explained. “The informant has finally sent the key information.”

A couple of hours ago, that had been meaningful, but now it no longer interested Bai Jun. Neither did developments in the state of world politics; according to the words of his adjutant, country after country and head of state after head of state were all topsy-turvy as old problems took on a new relevance.

Perry Rhodan’s speech and the presentation of the alien Crest a few hours earlier had further shaken the already unstable power structure of their planet. The fragile construction of power and equality of arms would collapse shortly. Bai Jun was convinced of that.

The general let his adjutant do the talking. Why should he care what was happening outside? He was standing here, at the center, at the source of all changes. At the place where the future would be born, pushing out of its mother’s womb like a baby. It could not happen without labor and pain. He, Bai Jun, was the one who had to set this newborn child on the right path. And, if necessary, he would trim it with a sharp blade, even if it called for its mother with its last breath.

The general discovered something half-hidden protruding from

the sand: a rag of blue fabric. He stepped forward and pulled it towards him. Grains of sand trickled down from the American flag —a piece of fabric that had presumably come from a space suit. It had been removed ruggedly and unprofessionally, probably torn off by sheer force.

He turned to his adjutant. “This will take some time. Put up my command tent here on this hill. It’s the right place. I have to take care of something in the meantime.”

Before he had taken even three steps, he heard He Jian-Dong’s voice. “Where are you going, general?”

Without turning around, Bai Jun rushed on. “I am going to pay a visit to someone.”

As he approached the protective dome, he put the flag into his uniform pocket.

Splinter of Development (4)

Protocol for the first interrogation of David Torrance, operator of the anonymous internet blog *Alien Facers*. The protocol was issued the day before the landing of the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert.

"You will listen to me carefully now, okay? How did you come up with what you wrote in your blog?"

DT: "Which blog? What are you talking about? What is all this about? I demand—"

"Be quiet! I'm warning you, don't take me for a fool!"

DT: "And now?" [laughs] "Am I supposed to reply or be quiet?"

"You little..."

"Calm down, Jack. Don't let yourself be provoked. Now, Mr. Torrance, we know that you're the author of the blog *Alien Facers*. You talk about evidence of the existence of aliens."

DT: "Okay, let's pretend that's true. I know the blog, sure. It's included texts for a long time that have been..."

"That doesn't matter!"

DT: "Yes, it does! Why are you arresting me right now? Have I hit a nerve, is that it? Have I..."

"So you're admitting that you *are* the author of this blog?"

DT: "I might as well! How is..."

"We ask the questions here, all right? What is the basis of your writing?"

DT: "Common sense. I am glad that by now the government has also noticed that something..."

"Stick to the point, will you?"

"Jack, take it easy."

"If you ask me, this is a waste of time. He's just a crank."

DT: "I refuse to..."

"You do what you want. I'm getting out of here."

"Fine, let's continue later. Mr. Torrance, we'll be confronting you with another suspect."

DT: "And who is that supposed to be?"

[mocking laughter]
“You’ll find out.”

Note: Agents Jack Anderson and Carl Stephens have come to a concurrent first assessment: Torrance is a harmless conspiracy theorist who doesn’t know anything about the current events on the Moon. Purely coincidence. Yet they both decided to go through with the confrontation with Professor Langke.

5.

June 27, 2036,
Twelve hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

"It has become quiet," noted Crest da Zoltral.

The old Arkonide lay on his chair. He still looked weak but less miserable than he had on the Moon or during their trip back to Earth. Apparently, he had regained some of his strength. His voice had a dark, smoky timbre, and every word seemed to expand into the corners of the cockpit and far beyond.

He glanced to the side, through the cockpit window, and Rhodan followed his gaze. On the horizon, he recognized the Chinese troops, who had abruptly changed their parade and distanced themselves from the craft. The soldiers now resembled little dots that almost blended in with the sandy plain. Individually, they would have disappeared; only as part of a crowd did they stand out from their environment. It looked like a crawling anthill. Countless tanks and mortars towered between them.

Perry Rhodan sat in his pilot's seat, close to Crest's formchair, right in front of the energy field that protected Crest from contact with the terrestrial air. Due to his weakened immune system, which was a consequence of the leukemia diagnosed by Dr. Manoli, each breath could have hastened his death.

There was little space in the small room. Crest's recliner had been precisely set up in a tiny cleared-out space, and it floated delicately on an anti-gravitation field.

"The military is demonstrating its power, but it has come to realize that continuous bombardment is pointless. It proves their powerlessness."

"Have they actually realized that?" Crest asked. "Or do they have no choice because they don't want to waste their ammunition? Maybe they are also frustrated and angry."

Rhodan nodded slowly. His hands lay on the armrests, his head on the headrest. It was a well-known posture that reminded him of

the murderous flight into space and to the Moon.

"Where is the difference in what you just enumerated?"

"Here, my friend." The Arkonide tapped softly on his temple. "Only here."

The gesture seemed human and all too familiar. It belied the foreignness of the old man, yet at the same time stressed the commonalities between the two living beings in the room.

"You know, Crest, I'm amazed yet again by how similar we are."

"You and I?"

Rhodan gave it some thought. "Even more. Our species. Humans and Arkonides."

"These humans who are running military maneuvers out there and have dropped thousands of bombs on us over the last few hours? Or humans like you?"

"You tell me."

The Arkonide remained silent. What was going on inside of him, Rhodan couldn't begin to fathom. His facial expressions and gestures remained indecipherable, coming from an entirely different biological background, a different culture and civilization.

"Do such differences also exist among your people?" the astronaut asked.

The alien turned around on his chair. The shield enclosing him muffled the sounds of his movements as little as the words.

"So many questions? Don't forget that we are talking about the people on this planet, not about the Arkonides. Your kind is the subject we have to deal with. Who knows when the time will come to go beyond that? Look, Rhodan, at what's happening there. The soldiers have been shooting at us all day only to now cease their fire all of a sudden. Do you really believe in coincidence? Or delayed insight?"

"That would be nice," Rhodan replied. "But you're right. I don't believe it. Something about the whole situation has changed." *And I don't like it at all that they're taking up a position so far away*, he added mentally.

He could not suppress an evil and frightening thought—the fearful question of whether the military was planning to deploy a more powerful and destructive weapon. What if right now a nuclear warhead was being prepared?

Crest sat up. His long, white-blonde hair fell over his shoulders

and down his back. His form was haggard, the tendons on his neck protruding from the exertion. Red eyes in a pale face sought the gaze of his counterpart.

"You know your people better than I do. What could have happened that would explain such a shift?"

If I only knew, Rhodan thought. It was as much a mystery to him as the fact that Crest was always avoiding a conversation about his own species. "There are new orders," he suggested somberly, deciding to express his fears. "Or a concentrated attack is being prepared. With more powerful weapons."

The alien lowered his gaze. "Your species is militant, but at least you are aware of it. It's good not to disregard your nature. That is the only way to overcome the bad parts of it and move on."

"Not everyone has a destructive disposition," Rhodan said vehemently. "There are many who have something else on their minds and who..."

"Just let it be. I understand what you are trying to say." There was a deep sadness in the alien's voice, a sound of resignation. "And I admire your attitude. However, we should make use of the calm we are currently being granted."

"It's merely the calm before the storm." Rhodan stood. "That is one of my people's sayings. It means..."

"I understand it. The words speak for themselves."

"You must have an extremely bad impression of us, Crest. What you have seen with your own eyes speaks against us."

"No," the alien replied. "I have experienced very different things."

He's shown a part of himself, but he won't go any further, Rhodan realized. *He won't explain to me what he really thinks and why. This man holds a secret, something from the story of his life that has made him the person he is now.*

He had difficulty assessing the man. Crest's relationship with Thora, the commander of their massive ship, puzzled him as well. The only thing that was certain was that the two Arkonides showed completely different behaviors. Crest seemed to Rhodan to be far more generous, open, and friendly than the cool, distant, disciplined Thora. Not to mention the two dozen *Aetron* crew members of whom he and Bull had only caught glimpses—those Arkonides who lay on their loungers apathetically and stared at the clouds of light over their heads.

Or was he wrong in his assessments of Crest and Thora? Could he even measure beings from a different world by human character standards and qualities? Regardless, there was something else that he had to think about much more urgently than the thousand questions he had about the aliens.

"I thank you for your frankness," Rhodan stated. It seemed sensible to him to concentrate on this area rather than on the things the Arkonide kept hidden. After all, Crest had every right to keep his secrets. Rhodan didn't put everything out in the open either. It would not have been possible, given the short time frame they had together. "And for apparently believing in the goodness of my species."

"Don't we have to if we want to survive? Believe in the goodness of every species between the stars? No matter what..." Crest broke off.

"Please go on."

"No matter what we see and experience."

"I agree with you, but many see it differently. At least that's how it is with many of my people. It's a fundamental question of our existence. Is there goodness in humans, or are we evil by nature? We wage wars, and when I see what is happening on this planet, I see infinite suffering. Pain that we inflict upon each other for whatever reason."

"Because there is a lack of reverence," the Arkonide offered.

Rhodan understood immediately what he was suggesting. "Reverence for life," he commented. "Isn't that what you mean, Crest da Zoltral?"

"Everyone deserves that reverence. And the belief that there is a better future. Even if you want to give up in the face of what you experience."

"Has it come to a disaster on your planet? And what do you see..."

"Don't go on talking," interrupted the Arkonide. "I won't discuss these things. Not as long as there is an army out there trying to kill us."

"There is only one way to confront it."

Rhodan rose from the pilot's seat and went straight to the observation window in the small cockpit, placing both hands flat against it. It felt cold. He stood so close that his breath condensed on the glass.

"We have to take our fate into our own hands. Confront what we observe out there. Paired with the belief in our goodness that you spoke of, that is how we'll find the strength to change."

Light caught in the Arkonide's eyes, and they seemed to glow red from the inside. "Giving up in the face of what we see is always the wrong answer."

It sounded like he was reading it off a page, like a cliché memorized and quoted often. True conviction behind the statement was missing, his own inner drive giving the words the necessary power of persuasion.

Rhodan wondered again what was going on inside this man. What had he experienced? And what had ultimately led to the contact between their two species? Was it really only a crash because the Arkonides on board had become so passive that they were immersed in their strange games? Or was there more to it?

"Why did you come to our solar system, Crest?"

"I..." The Arkonide raised his arms. His fingertips touched each other. Then he lay back again, turning his head to the side and folding his hands over his chest. His breath was calm and relaxed. "Let's talk about it later."

"Does it have anything to do with us? With humanity itself? With the situation we're in?"

He didn't mention the two possibilities that arose from this, formulating them only in his thoughts. *And if so, have you come to help or to punish us?*

Crest remained silent.

"Listen, please," Rhodan insisted. "We don't agree about how we're supposed to proceed now. I've talked to my colleagues, to Reginald Bull, Eric Manoli and Clark Flipper. One opinion is that we have to demonstrate to humanity the power we have." He paused for a short, precisely timed moment. "Or, more specifically, what power *you* have, Crest. You and your species. With your superior technology we might be able to force humanity to come to its senses!"

"Do you really believe that's possible? Can you create...peace by force? That's what this is about for you, isn't it? Peace for your world?"

Rhodan nodded until it occurred to him that his counterpart might not be able to interpret the gesture correctly. It had become second nature, though; he did it instinctively.

“You’re right,” he replied. “But I don’t want to use violence. That’s why force isn’t the right word. A...demonstration of our instruments of power would be the more appropriate expression.”

“A threat, then.”

Again, Rhodan wanted to object, but he kept silent as he thought about it more closely. Ultimately, that was exactly right. “I suppose this is a philosophical debate and a matter of interpretation.”

“Peace through the balance of the instruments of power or through one party having greater power.” Crest’s voice was thoughtful. “Whether they have the better intentions or simply the more effective weapons. Don’t get me wrong, I’m certainly not disinclined to agree with or help you.”

Rhodan felt the excitement of an incredible opportunity rising up inside him. “By the standards of our planet, you are almost almighty with your technology. But we know about only tiny fragments of your abilities! I saw so much more on the Moon. Help us, Crest! That’s the plea I’m making, and I’m glad that you’re willing to consider it. Your *Aetron* possesses sixteen auxiliary craft. Just one of those would be enough. Crest, put one of these sixty-meter ships at my disposal.”

He knew it was a bold request. For the Arkonide, a ship of that size might merely be a small, insignificant auxiliary craft, but for terrestrial space travel, it was a giant that possessed inconceivable technological means.

The alien remained silent.

“One of sixteen,” stressed Rhodan again. “No doubt you can do without it.”

“Technically, yes. But Thora will never allow it, and she is, after all, the commander of the *Aetron*.”

“But with you as my advocate, Crest, the situation may be entirely different. You are an Arkonide, just like her, and you understand what’s important to me. I’m not looking to expand my own power by misusing your technology! I only want one thing: to save my planet, protect my species from the ruin into which they are relentlessly slipping! This situation, this encounter with you is a great chance for humanity but also a source of infinite danger. If envy, distrust, and fear prevail, there will be disaster!”

Rhodan took a deep breath and considered his next words very carefully. “You bear responsibility for my species and my world.

After meeting you and Thora, things have started moving, and all the dangers we face have grown more acute."

"Responsibility," Crest repeated quietly.

Rhodan tried to figure out the alien's mood. Had he gone too far? Had he made the old Arkonide angry? Maybe the accusation behind his words wasn't justified.

Crest remained silent and closed his eyes. He looked as if he were falling asleep. Only one thing indicated otherwise: his hands were slowly moving, and his fingers clutched the outer edge of his formchair. As if that were the trigger, a sudden jolt went through it, then a shrill tone sounded, and the chair sagged before crashing to the floor.

Crest winced, almost sliding over the edge. His face contorted in pain, and abruptly, he sat up. A flicker danced in the air around the formchair, like the streaks of a bursting soap bubble. A moment later, both their guest and his recliner hovered back to their initial positions by themselves. The sudden damage had repaired itself automatically.

The flicker went out, and the Arkonide gasped. For a moment, it looked as if he couldn't breathe. His red eyes widened, the pupils narrowing to tiny dots.

"The protective dome," Crest said. "It is broken."

"You're..."

"The air of your planet is contaminating me." The Arkonide's voice sounded calm and considerate. He seemed to be relaxing into himself more than ever. "I can breathe it, as you know, but I can't tell what effects it may have on my illness. The bacteria of your world..."

He fell silent when a third figure slid into the cockpit. Reginald Bull stuck his head into the small room first. The skin of his face was red from the sun, but compared to his rusty red hair, it still seemed pale.

"I hate to disturb you, but it's important."

Rhodan's gaze moved back and forth between Crest and his crewmate. What if the Arkonide's state grew even worse now? What if his immune system became even more strained and he died? How would Thora react?

"Reg, we..."

"I know, Perry. But we have a visitor. There's someone who would like to talk to you. Outside the protective dome."

Rhodan nodded. “I’ll have to leave you alone, Crest.”

“Go ahead. I hope you can bring this delegate to their senses. Is it a messenger from the military? An ambassador?”

Reginald Bull confirmed his guess.

“Before I go,” said Rhodan, “I would like to ask you for one more piece of information. What is your relationship to Thora?”

“She is an orphan who I took into my household.”

“So the commander of the *Aetron* owes you a lot, and you are a father figure to her. Then remember what we just talked about, Crest. If you think it right to provide me with an auxiliary craft, convince Thora.”

The Arkonide gave him an unreadable look, then Rhodan turned to Bull and stepped out of the control center.

Splinter of Development (5)

Message from Professor Dr. Hermann Langke, scribbled on a piece of toilet paper in the bathroom of his house, discovered by his wife eight hours before the landing of the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert:

Annie, agents have been after me since university. They will arrest me. Pass it on to George. The Moon mission has to do with the discovery of aliens. Get me Frank as a lawyer. He knows what to do. Don’t be afraid. I love you.

6.

Two days before the Stardust *landed in the Gobi Desert*

The muzzle of the gun looked at him like a deadly eye. But Allan Mercant kept his nerve. He had experienced far more dangerous situations in his life.

"So," said Iga Tulodziecki. "Who or what are you?"

He deliberated his alternatives in a flash. It was impossible to escape. Iga seemed very determined, and they were moving at full speed. By now, the truck was thundering down the road at over ninety miles per hour, steered by the autopilot, which kept it safely on track. Maybe he could have wrested the gun from and eliminated her, but that was out of the question. He couldn't hurt her. She had welcomed him kindly and had tried to help him; it would be poor thanks for him to attack her now.

"Come on!" she demanded.

Mercant slowly lifted his left hand, stuck out his thumb, and pointed it towards the windshield. "Oncoming traffic, Wonderbra!"

"No distractions!"

"I've never trusted autopilots before, not in small cars and even less so in giant trucks!"

"No...distractions!"

An oncoming car raced by.

"Don't you think it's a little much to pull a weapon just because my spare canister isn't empty?"

Iga raised the gun a little so that the muzzle was now pointing right at his forehead. "Be glad that I'm such a good-natured and happy person. For the last time: what's your real name?"

"You want to know who I am? Fine. Allan Chesterfield. Journalist. I published a politically inconvenient series of articles. Have you heard about the emerging censorship?" He hoped that his assessment of the trucker was correct. She was probably some sort of free spirit to whom individuality and autonomy meant everything.

Although Mercant thought the talk of censorship curtailing the public freedom of opinion more and more was completely exaggerated, with this lie, he hoped to get Iga on his side and win some sympathy points. It didn't really say anything and left a lot of room for interpretation.

"Go on," she demanded. With her left hand, she adjusted the strap of her overalls over her shoulder.

In his eyes her posture was already more relaxed than it had been a moment before. "I've stepped on the government's toes a bit. That's why they want to...hm, interrogate me. Which in turn doesn't thrill me, as you might imagine."

"That doesn't explain why you were walking around with a gas canister."

"Do you know the motel just under a mile past where you picked me up?"

She laughed, and suddenly she looked gorgeous. "A horrible place. Spiders, dirt, and..."

"...used condoms," Mercant finished.

That made her laugh even harder. She lowered the gun perceptibly. "You were there?"

"Slept there for an hour. Then people I certainly didn't want to meet showed up. I left my car there, since they were apparently tenaciously following it, grabbed the canister, and continued as a hitchhiker. Evidently I didn't do a brilliant job."

"Indeed."

It was precisely the mixture of lies and facts that made Mercant's story seem credible. While his persecutors hadn't really shown up at the motel, that was exactly what he had feared would happen. He didn't want to tell the trucker the true story—it was, to start with, too explosive and secondly, all too unlikely. Aliens, nuclear bombs, Homeland Security, executed secret service agents around the world, the spaceport in Nevada Fields. Elements that might figure in a science fiction thriller but not in reality.

Iga put the gun away and returned her hands to the wheel. "Autopilot off!" she said, and the truck's voice control immediately obeyed.

"One question," Mercant asked. "You do realize that was dangerous right now?"

"Sometimes I drive around on autopilot for hours. In emergency situations, it reacts faster than human reflexes could."

“That’s not what I meant. If you had decided to use the gun, I could have easily taken you down with me.”

“Don’t underestimate me just because I’m a woman. I know how to handle a gun. If I wanted, you’d have been dead or badly hurt before you could say a word. Even now you would be.”

“But I could have used the voice control to switch off the autopilot. Swerving off the road or into an oncoming car at a hundred miles per hour… There wouldn’t be much left of us now.”

Iga “Wonderbra” Tulodziecki laughed. It sounded raucous and dry, a bit like the voice of a woman who had been smoking all her life. Yet Iga showed none of the typical signs of a heavy smoker.

“How lucky that I didn’t shoot you,” she said, “and that you are not an insane highway killer.”

“You aren’t taking any of this seriously, are you?”

“Life is hard enough as it is.”

For a while, they continued in silence. The countryside seemed to fly by.

They had just passed a village when Iga said, “I don’t believe the story about the censorship and the anti-government articles.”

Allan leaned back in the passenger seat. “But you lowered your gun.”

“I hadn’t read this yet.” She pointed at the windshield.

For a moment, Mercant didn’t understand, then he noticed the little lines of news crawling along the bottom of the window on the driver’s side.

“A news ticker,” he said, stunned.

“I’ll show you what I’m getting at.” She pressed a sensor button on the steering wheel, and the news ticker rapidly reversed until an image appeared on the left side. It moved slowly to the middle, making room for some accompanying text.

The image showed Mercant himself. The text mentioned his name, Allan Mercant, and called him a wanted, dangerous terrorist (caution: armed).

“To be honest, I’m amazed you haven’t pulled your gun out again,” he noted.

“Well, I don’t want you to switch off the autopilot and kill us both.” The trucker stared obstinately at the road and avoided looking at him. “It’s logical. I value my life. Besides, I have a load to deliver, otherwise the customer will get mad. Old trucker law: never piss off the people who pay you. And to me, those laws are

sacred."

"Sounds reasonable."

"You know," Iga continued conversationally, "if I rolled the news back even further, you'd see there's a high price on your head. I could really use the money—Steph is far from paid off. The truck, remember?"

"But?"

"But it also says who's looking for you."

"Let me guess: Homeland Security."

"Exactly."

"And?"

"And what?" she asked.

"Your story is still missing the punchline."

"I hate Homeland Security," Iga replied. "Bunch of hypocritical bastards who pretend to protect America. And yet they shit on everything our country stands for when it doesn't serve them."

A radical description, Allan thought, but after his most recent experiences, there might have been something to it. "So, you like terrorists."

She grinned broadly. It wasn't only her face that was beautiful. Allan's gaze wandered over her neck to her hair. It shone, as short as it was.

"In this case, unfortunately, I have to disappoint you," Mercant said. "They regard me as a terrorist, if I'm to believe the news, but I'm not."

"Which again doesn't automatically make you a bad person, shorty."

Again, he did not mind the disrespectful term. On the contrary, he felt more and more attracted to Wonderbra. "How did you arrive at your opinion of Homeland Security?"

"My brother got caught up in the machinery of that agency by injustice. The bastards got him out of the way and have been keeping him locked up somewhere ever since. I don't have the slightest idea where."

"Doesn't sound good at all." Mercant knew very well that there were far more such cases that were unknown to the public.

Iga braked. "Listen, terrorist." She steered the truck to the side of the road, into an emergency rest stop that offered barely enough room. Beyond Mercant's window, a sparsely vegetated hill loomed. In the thin bushes a myriad of red berries glistened. "I won't turn

you in, but I want to hear the truth."

"All right," he conceded. "You've earned it. But be prepared for it to knock you off your feet."

"I'm a trucker. Nothing knocks me out that fast."

Allan Mercant began his story. For at least ten minutes, his companion was silent and only listened.

When she did speak, the first words that came out of her mouth were, "That really does knock me out."

Mercant had told her the truth, and the more he'd talked, the better he'd felt. Surprisingly, he had a strange sense of trust in Iga despite her being a total stranger to him.

"I haven't finished yet," he continued. "The *Stardust* was carrying an atomic bomb that was intended to destroy an alien spacecraft on the Moon. I prevented it by contacting NASA's Flight Director and..."

"Aliens? Are you serious?" Her face looked like a mask.

He nodded. "And I don't think it can be kept secret for much longer. Soon, everyone will know. But congratulations, Iga, you're among the first."

Over the next few minutes, she continued to listen wordlessly to his report.

"Are you maybe one of them?" she asked at last. He looked at her confused. "An alien," she clarified.

"No, I'm only a human. Not even a terrorist." He shrugged. "Unfortunately."

On the road, another giga truck thundered past and honked. Iga didn't pay any attention. "So, you're really human?"

"Most definitely."

"I'd better check."

She leaned over, put her hand on the nape of his neck, and kissed him. The kiss was surprisingly soft and gentle, very different from her outward appearance. When she wanted to withdraw, Allan held her tight.

"You know, I don't have time for...romance," she said. "I have a load to transport."

He nodded. "I know what obligations are. Please take me with you a little farther."

"No."

"No?"

"I just talked about romance." She reached past the steering

wheel and pressed a button on the center console to which Mercant could not attribute any particular function. A soft buzz sounded behind them. “So, if you can do without?”

He turned around. Between the seats a hatch had opened, just big enough to squeeze through. Only then did he understand what Iga was getting at.

“I can,” he said.

Iga was asleep, her hand resting on his cheek. He smelled the old lube oil under her fingernails. The sleeping space between the driver’s cab and the loading area was uncomfortably small, but—Mercant had to admit—extraordinarily comfortable. A mattress, pillow, blanket, and box to put one’s clothes in. Actually, that was enough, considering *neither* of them currently needed romance.

He considered his situation. Had the Homeland Security agents become aware of the shabby motel by now? The escape car still sat there in the parking lot. Mercant had undoubtedly been filmed with the car as he had exited the spaceport, so it was probable that Mr. Greasy Shirt receptionist was being put through the wringer at this very moment.

He couldn’t have cared less; thanks to Iga, he was far enough away, and right now there was likely nothing leading to him. His next destination was set. There was a place where he had prepared everything for this moment, knowing that it would inevitably arrive someday—the day he and Homeland Security parted ways. However, that location was not close, and as Allan D. Mercant, a wanted and dangerous terrorist, he could not make the three thousand-mile trip there as he was now.

He was forced, therefore, to adjust his appearance to fit the image shown on the fake passport that Flight Director Pounder had given him. He had to slip into this camouflage identity temporarily. Only in New Orleans could he up stakes. Then even Lesly Pounder would no longer know what name and look he was traveling under.

Iga’s fingertips moved. His nose tickled. Suddenly, her hand twitched, a breath whiffed over his shoulder, and the trucker sat up.

“A good name,” Allan said.

She looked at him both sleepily and inquiringly.

“Wonderbra,” he explained. “I hardly know a woman who needs one less than you do. So it suits you perfectly.”

She made no effort to cover her breasts and leaned against the

wall of the narrow sleeping cabin. “Actually, I wanted to be quite a bit farther on at this point. We can’t afford another break today. You’re coming, aren’t you?”

He agreed. What else could he do for the moment? His goal was to put as much distance as possible between Nevada Fields and himself.

“What are you going to do after this?” Iga asked.

“I have to go to New Orleans.”

“How are you going to get there?”

“I don’t know.”

She pulled her bare legs out from under the blanket and fished around for her underwear. “I do.”

Splinter of Development (6)

E-mail message to all students of Prof. Dr. Hermann Langke, a few hours before the landing of the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert.

Sender: George Townsend, Scientific Assistant at the Chair for Social Skills and Viral Network Marketing.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I hereby inform you that during his research, Professor Langke discovered a phenomenon of the highest actuality. He has been detained by the Secret Service. The fact that I am telling you this probably means that my lectures will also be canceled shortly for the time being.

I hereby call for public protests. Thanks to this email, the message won't be suppressed any longer. Don't believe any affirmations to the contrary from official sources.

With these words, I assume my responsibility before God and the people. Just like me, some of you were present at the lecture where Professor Langke talked about the existence of aliens. Keep your eyes open for coverage of the *Stardust* mission; your field of study predisposes you to look behind the scenes and notice things.

Take advantage of your opportunities.

The truth shall not be silenced.

Signed: George Townsend, PhD.

7.

June 27, 2036,
Thirteen hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

His eyes were almond-shaped, and something about the figure of his counterpart told Rhodan that he was dealing with a man who wasn't strictly Han Chinese.

The stranger introduced himself as "General Bai Jun, Commander-in-Chief of the troops that have encircled the *Stardust*."

"Perry Rhodan," the astronaut replied simply. He lifted his arm as if to greet the general with a handshake, but of course there was no touching due to the energy dome between them.

Bai Jun stood there rigidly before bowing theatrically. "I know who you are."

"You've probably read my psychogram and therefore know more about me than I know about myself. So you have a clear advantage."

The other finally showed a first sign of emotion on his face—a tentative, no doubt precisely calculated smile. "Do you want to reproach me for that?"

"I would have done the same in your position. As would anyone with a clear mind."

"You are Perry Rhodan, thirty-seven years old, elite astronaut at NASA. Small scar on the left nostril."

"The right one," Rhodan corrected.

"Just a test."

"I know."

"Do you want to hear more?"

"I'm convinced that you've done your homework thoroughly." He let his eyes wander. In the distance, behind the dried riverbed stood the hill that he had visited after landing. The scars on the bone-dry ground pointed in that direction. He turned his head slightly; to the side lay the Juyan salt lake.

"You're trying to figure out where I came from?" The general

pulled something out of his pocket, hidden in his closed hand. “You have already visited the place where I am having my headquarters built as we speak.”

He opened his fist. It contained a piece of cloth that showed the American flag. A couple of hours ago, Rhodan had carelessly torn it off his uniform.

“I didn’t expect to see that again.”

Bai Jun stretched out his hand until it almost touched the sparkle in the air—the defensive shield.

“Take it.”

“The shield is impermeable.”

“Deactivate it. At least at this spot.”

“Not necessary. I don’t need that piece of cloth any longer. You keep it.”

The general dropped the fabric. It spun briefly in the air, then landed at his feet. “Let’s come to the point. There are important things to discuss. Please let me in.”

“I won’t open the field.”

“Are you afraid of a single human?”

“It’s not about fear, general. We can have our conversation right where we’re standing now. The dome doesn’t interfere with the acoustics in any way, and I see you as clearly as—”

“Okay,” his counterpart interrupted.

“You’re of Chinese and...Mongolian descent?” Rhodan asked.

For the first time, the general seemed slightly insecure. “Why does that interest you?”

“You know everything about me. I know nothing about you.”

Bai Jun nodded almost imperceptibly, casually bent down, and picked up the torn flag from Rhodan’s uniform. “You are mistaken. My father was Han Chinese, my mother Uyghur. There are no Mongols in my family tree. And if you’re interested, I don’t have any children. Bai means ‘white,’ whereas Jun means—”

“The army,” Rhodan finished.

The general looked unaffected. “Can we move on to the actual topic now?”

“Please.”

“In the name of my people, I ask you to surrender. The *Stardust* has landed in Chinese territory without authorization.”

The astronaut didn’t have to think long about his answer. “I refuse.”

“May I remind you of the superior force I represent? An entire army has taken up position all around. No…that’s not true. Several armies.”

Rhodan folded his arms in front of his chest, a posture that signaled spite and resistance. And composure. “I doubt this superior force is too overwhelming for me and my companions. After all, you’ve been trying for hours to exterminate us. With all due respect, General, by now you’ve probably realized that you can’t defeat us through violence and are trying a new tactic.”

“You are incorrect.”

Rhodan rubbed the scar on his nostril. “How can you be so sure?”

“I have only recently taken over command of these troops. My first action was to cease the pointless fire and set up a safety zone.” Bai Jun made a comprehensive hand gesture. “Neutral territory, so to speak.”

“That sounds sensible, and I appreciate it.” Rhodan leaned his head back and glanced vaguely at the sky. “But it doesn’t change the fact that this defensive shield made from Arkonide technology is encompassing the ship, and you can’t crack it. The *Stardust* and its crew, including our alien guest… We’re all perfectly safe here.”

“Think about my offer nevertheless.”

“What would you do if we capitulated?”

Bai Jun’s eyes narrowed. “I would extradite you.”

“And then? What would happen to us after that?”

“That doesn’t concern me. I am a soldier. What becomes of you is a matter for the government.”

Rhodan laughed softly. “Such a limited perspective isn’t worthy of you.” He was convinced that Bai Jun had very carefully thought it over and had quite specific ideas. This man was most certainly not the simple soldier he was pretending to be. On the contrary, he was an extremely capable military strategist, as proven by the very fact that he had been appointed commander-in-chief of the troops in such a delicate situation.

The general turned around. “Then there’s nothing left for us to talk about.”

“Come on, Bai Jun,” Rhodan shouted, “you must have thousands of questions on the tip of your tongue.”

“And what would those be?”

He’s good. He’s trying to draw me out because he knows very well

that, in a sense, I'll have to depend on him if this situation isn't to go on indefinitely.

"Come now, Mr. Rhodan, speak your mind."

"You want to know where Crest da Zoltral is. Want to see him. Want—"

"I'm not here for sensational tourism. I'm here to alleviate a dangerous situation," the general asserted.

"Besides," Rhodan continued unperturbed, "you ask yourself if I, as an American, have lost my mind having allied myself with the aliens who are responsible for the destruction of our lunar bases."

"You should have become a psychologist, not an astronaut, if you take such great pleasure in analyzing other people." Bai Jun gave a theatrical wave. "But I want to do you a favor and hold up a mirror for you, Mr. Rhodan. Your words betray you. What did you just ask? 'If I, as an American, have lost my mind.' The answer lies here in the dust at my feet."

The general lifted his right leg, stepped on the piece of cloth bearing the flag, and trampled on it as one would trample an ugly insect under the soles of one's shoes.

"You're not an American any longer, Mr. Rhodan. At least not in here." He tapped his temple. "Here is where your error lies. You see yourself as a citizen of this world, probably carrying around the ideal of wanting to save the whole planet. To end the impending war and destruction. But you know what?" He bent down and picked up the dirty piece of cloth, now torn at the side as well. "In all of this, you are as American as you can be! You go only by your own way of thinking, your own philosophy, and you think you're the peak of evolution!"

Perry Rhodan remained calm. *He wants to provoke me,* he thought, *at any price and by all means.* He would not let himself succumb. And yet a quiet voice inside him asked if maybe Bai Jun's view might be right. Everything had happened so quickly. There had barely been any time to think. Had he chosen a path that would plunge the whole world into chaos? What was awaiting him if they actually had the possibility of traveling to the stars? Could he presume to be the trailblazer who would lead humanity into space?

Rhodan swept away these doubting thoughts. He couldn't allow Bai Jun's psychological warfare—for that was indeed what it was—to achieve its goal.

"You're a hopeless idealist, Rhodan."

“And you, general, don’t believe in the good but only in the evil of humans.”

“I’m a realist, nothing more and nothing less. Just look around. Humans have to be held back, or the destruction will get out of hand. Our goals are not so different.”

“I don’t like your means or the path you want to take.”

Bai Jun nodded. There was no hint left of the aggression that had been in his voice mere seconds earlier. He was an excellent actor; Rhodan had to acknowledge that ungrudgingly.

“Thus, our positions are clear,” the general continued. “We won’t come together. Not until you realize how wrong you are, Mr. Rhodan, if you actually believe that there is something good hidden in humans.”

“We will meet again, General,” Rhodan replied, “when things have evolved and the correct path becomes clear. Until then, I have a request.” Bai Jun looked at him, waiting. “I need a mobile diagnostic device.”

“What for?”

“Clark Flipper is sick,” Rhodan lied. “He is very concerned about his lover.”

“Beth.” With that, Bai Jun proved that he was optimally informed.

“His fear for her has affected his immune system. The stress of the double space flight was too much. Will you help us? It would be a sign of your goodwill, and I would be in your debt.”

The general considered it for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll be back soon.”

Without a word of farewell, he turned and marched off along the path of the dried tracks behind him.

Splinter of Development (7)

Response from the Homeland Security spokesperson to numerous inquiries, sent three hours before the landing of the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert:

No comment.

8.

June 27, 2036,
Eighteen hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

A pleasant coolness greeted Bai Jun as he stepped into his mobile command center and closed the tent panel behind him. Immediately, the heat of the desert lifted. The tent offered the necessary space and silence to reflect.

He headed purposefully for an armchair and sat down. Nobody saw him, and he relaxed his posture for the first time in hours. His back hurt. The coolness of the leather seeped through the uniform and spread from the back of his neck to his head.

Next to the entrance, the flag of the People's Republic of China hung above a shelf that contained every technical necessity. At least a dozen neatly packed identical boxes were stacked in the compartments. Only tiny characters written on them offered information about their respective contents.

The metal support struts of the shelf were anchored to the real wooden floor. Not even a raging storm could have torn it down. Everything sparkled with cleanliness. No sand dotted the floor, except for that left by Bai Jun's footsteps.

The general reflected. This Perry Rhodan was a worthy opponent, just as he had suspected. Their conversation had confirmed it. It would not be easy to get the better of him. Ostensible violence was certainly not the correct means in this case. At least not primarily.

Bai Jun sat entirely still. The cracking of the leather fell silent; only the gentle hum of the portable air conditioner filled the tent. He didn't switch on the chair's massage function, although he usually enjoyed the shiatsu grips. Instead he pondered his thoughts.

There was undoubtedly a way to overcome this eerie protective dome. If not through the sheer violence of explosives, then in a different, more cunning way. Through his contact with the astronaut, Bai Jun had gained an insight into the situation. He had

to urgently take the mentality and reactions of this American into account for further planning.

He opened a pocket in the armrest of the chair and took out a bottle. In it, a cloudy liquid shimmered, the brown streaks having settled. Bai Jun shook the drink, and the fungal spores dispersed evenly. He swore by the concentration-boosting effects of the fungal water and had even gotten used to its unpleasantly bitter taste over the years. His family had been using this traditional remedy for generations; as far as he knew, this special type of fungus grew only in the rock caverns beneath their country estate. His great-grandfather had grown this particular crossbreed himself.

The first sip burned his throat as always, and the fine suspended particles settled as a slimy film on the tongue. It felt like something strange in his mouth. After a couple of seconds, a prickling sensation traveled all the way to his fingertips. It was good to feel the invigorating effect.

His adjutant He Jian-Dong always said that the effect of the fungus could not be proven biologically or medically, but Bai Jun did not need more than he felt anyway. He drank a few more sips and put the bottle back into the chilled armrest pocket.

The aroma widened his senses like a drug. He saw the colors more strongly, smelled the scent of the desert more intensely than before. But after the first moment of refreshment, no real enjoyment set in. A great inner turmoil robbed him of his peace. He felt that a number of problems were coming his way. Perry Rhodan and the *Stardust* project would not be easy to handle.

He stood up, strode through the tent with a few steps, and flipped open the laptop on the mahogany shelf to check the latest information. He Jian-Dong regularly collected and bundled the incessantly incoming news and filtered what he deemed to be important for the general. This was one of the adjutant's normal tasks, and it was always performed to Bai Jun's satisfaction. Likely through his continuous connection with the Web, He Jian-Dong had developed a notion for differentiating what was truly important from the junk and the pseudo information that appeared to be important in the data stream.

As soon as Bai Jun had read the first piece of news—the images of the alien Crest had triggered a suicide wave among the members of an obscure end-times cult—the signal of an incoming call went off.

Bai Jun pressed a button and answered.

The image on the computer monitor darkened for an instant, then his adjutant's profile appeared.

"Sorry to disturb you, General."

"Forget about it," Bai Jun replied sternly. Without a doubt, He Jian-Dong had a good reason for this.

In the other man's face, which would have seemed expressionless to outsiders, Bai Jun could read relief. On other occasions, the general had reacted to such interruptions touchily and with a good deal of anger, which—as Bai Jun was well aware—scared his subordinate. In a way, it was good to remain unpredictable.

"A helicopter is approaching," the other declared. "Huang Hai-Jie is on board."

The general's posture stiffened. His lower back began to hurt again. "When will he arrive?"

"Less than ten minutes. I only just learned about it myself and therefore couldn't let you know earlier..."

"Forget about it." The phrase sounded like a growl, and Bai Jun terminated the connection without waiting for a reply.

Huang Hai-Jie, the general secretary of the Communist Party. A man who didn't go into the heart of the action very often himself but sent thousands of lackeys to appear in public and to be photographed by the media for him. This time it was different, of course. Huang Hai-Jie had a sharp mind and naturally wanted to get a picture of the situation himself.

Thoughtfully, Bai Jun returned to his armchair and sat down. As expected, less than a minute later, He Jian-Dong appeared. He seemed a little absent, probably because he was absorbed in the news stream that the receiver in his ear was transmitting; however, his expression cleared immediately, and he greeted the general subserviently.

"The general secretary will be arriving shortly," he announced. "The helicopter is already within range of the portable radar. May I make the necessary provisions?"

Bai Jun nodded a confirmation. His adjutant took a small transceiver and hissed an order into it with unusual aggression. Shortly afterwards, two soldiers carried another armchair into the command tent and positioned it across from where the general sat. Bai Jun did not usually keep an equivalent chair for guests ready,

but when necessary, he broke that rule.

Huang Hai-Jie's visit counted as a necessity.

The soldiers withdrew silently.

"Is there any information about the general secretary's mood?" he asked his adjutant.

"All I could discover with the help of my private sources is that he went to his private jet without notice and in a rush, and that he landed in Hohhot an hour ago," came the reply.

Bai Jun closed his eyes and prepared for the coming conversation. A tedious duty, because in the end Huang Hai-Jie would not have anything constructive to contribute. But what had to be done had to be done.

The general secretary of the Communist Party, one of the most powerful people in the world, was small and fat. But Huang Hai-Jie's facial expression showed an iron determination. His gaze was sharp, his eyes an icy gray color that was unusual for the Chinese.

"I welcome you." Bai Jun said, already standing, implying a bow as he smiled thinly—a meaningless, artificial politeness. "And I thank you for the honor of—"

"I know," Hai-Jie interrupted.

The general didn't let his anger show. Usually it was he who didn't let other people finish—mostly his adjutant, with an expression of "Forget about it!"—but Bai Jun was clever enough to know when to submit.

"Give me a status report, General! Why did you position the troops so far from each other? How do you intend to collapse this enemy dome?"

Collapse, Bai Jun thought. That was hardly the right word. But he would certainly not correct the general secretary. He thought he could smell the aroma of Hai-Jie's cigarillo.

"For military reasons, it was necessary to set up a safe zone. We're already working on collapsing the shield."

He let his gaze wander across the room, enjoying the stunned face of his adjutant, who was standing right in front of the portable air conditioner. It had to be pretty cold there, but he had always had a preference for the cooler areas of the world.

Huang Hai-Jie ignored the armchair that had been brought in specially for him. Therefore the general remained standing as well.

"My soldiers are working their way underground, up to Perry

Rhodan and the *Stardust*," he explained to his visitor. "That way, we will obtain access to the alien."

"And eliminate him," the general secretary returned in a voice as if he were talking about the party's last successful champagne reception and the pretty women who had been there. "In this situation, we have to show iron strength. We don't know by which means he might liberate himself from captivity."

Ten more minutes of discussion followed before Huang Hai-Jie took his leave with the words, "I want to see the corpse of this Crest da Zoltral with my own eyes. You will be personally responsible for that, General!"

With that, the man who was as small and fat as he was powerful left the command tent. A relieved Bai Jun and his stunned adjutant remained.

"Tunnels? You want to dig tunnels, General? Do you really think the dome is not closed all around? The solid matter of the ground will certainly not stop such a structure! Wouldn't it be quite easy to get in that way? A progressive technology like that of the aliens must be prepared for such an attempt."

"We'll have the soldiers dig," Bai Jun clarified. "That gives them something to do and will also reassure men like the general secretary. In the meantime, I will work on the solution of this problem in other ways."

He Jian-Dong saluted but did not retreat. From outside came the sound of a cranking helicopter. The rotor blades rattled in the air. The strong panels of the command tent trembled almost imperceptibly under the artificially raised storm. The flag of the People's Republic of China threw mild waves, as if fluttering in a clean breeze.

"General?" He Jian-Dong asked. Bai Jun nodded patronizingly. "Allow me one question. Why don't you order the attack? Our superiority is overwhelming."

"The defensive shield. We don't know when or how we can overcome it. My predecessors, those idiots, already did enough damage. Certainly, at some point it will come down...but when? There are no opportunities to compare this to, no precedent! What will happen while the whole world is watching us? No doubt dozens of satellites are already orienting themselves towards us. Billions are looking at the *Stardust*. At us!"

His adjutant withstood the sharp gaze. "You are right, General.

If we don't overcome the field, we will demonstrate our helplessness to the whole world."

"Like dumb insects, we would keep running against that invisible wall and making fools of ourselves!" Bai Jun opened the armrest pocket again and took out the bottle. He drank without offering anything to the other man. "But that's not all. If our attack succeeds and we eliminate the enemy subjects including the alien in this brutish way, we will look like barbarians! I can see it now—we break through the shield with force, and all that remains of the *Stardust* and the astronauts are shreds at the center of the explosion. A moment later, Rhodan will be a martyr, and millions will side with him in dismay. The media is just waiting for something like that to happen so that the West can campaign against our country. The volatile balance will tilt. The big news agencies have undoubtedly already prepared reports to that effect." The general put the bottle back, kneading his chin with a thumb and forefinger. "No, we have to think. Act purposefully."

"There is one thing we mustn't forget," his adjutant interjected. "A possibility that we must consider."

Of course, Bai Jun thought. *I know what you're getting at.*

"Perry Rhodan could strike back," continued He Jian-Dong. "He mustn't be underestimated. Who knows what weapons from the aliens are at his disposal?"

"Not only that." The general looked up through the glass roof of the command tent to the sky where the shining, cloudless blue had long since given way to the darkness of night. Stars twinkled above like tiny diamonds. The first day after the landing of the *Stardust* was coming to an end. "The other aliens on the Moon will certainly not stand by while we kill their comrade."

"So, what is left for us, then?"

"Very simple. We have to know our enemy, understand and outsmart him by being more calculating than he is. For now, let the soldiers dig their tunnel. Besides, I need a mobile diagnostic device. Rhodan asked me for it and I'll grant him that wish as a sign of my good faith."

"Yes, General. Should I rig the device?"

"Not necessary. Rhodan would see through it anyway, which would only put us at a disadvantage. But there is something else as well. We need interfering transmitters. I don't want our enemy to be able to receive or send out messages, do you understand? We have

to isolate him!”

Splinter of Development (8)

Recording of the radical political splinter group “New Call,” terrorist activities since August 2024; compiled a few hours before the landing of the *Stardust*. Seized by authorities on the night of June 27-28, 2036, as part of a special task force:

“Mr. Townsend, what...”

GT: “I demand to speak to my lawyer.”

“Do you know where you are?”

GT: “In the...custody of Homeland Security, I suppose. And now I demand to talk to my lawyer.”

“You better put that idea right out of your mind.”

GT: “I know my rights”.

“Do you hear that? He knows his rights.”

“I hear it.” [laughter]

“Mr. Townsend, this is not Homeland Security or any other government agency. We only want to know one thing from you.”

GT: “What are you doing? Put down the weapon!”

“Why do you claim the existence of aliens in a message to your students and associate Professor Langke with it? What do you know about the *Stardust*?”

GT: “Dammit, who are you?”

“Obviously, you haven’t understood the seriousness of the situation. I’ll give you exactly ten seconds, then I’ll move on to the next guy on a long list. So, Mr. Townsend: *talk*.”

GT: “I don’t think you—”

[Sound of a gunshot, then of a body hitting the ground.]

“Take him away. And bring the next one in.”

“But the blood...”

“It will make it clear to the next one that we have no more time to waste.”

9.

A few hours before the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

"You look strange," Iga Tulodziecki observed.

She sounded tired. The monotonous sound of the engine had almost put Allan Mercant to sleep as well.

"You think so?"

"The glasses and especially the mustache... Awful."

Mercant stroked the fake mustache hair, which was so bushy that it tickled his nostrils. "It's not exactly my favorite outfit. But I didn't have any other choice."

"Who on earth created that lousy photo set for your ID?"

Mercant grinned. Both Flight Director Pounder and the passport forger had done a perfect job, but they hadn't demonstrated particularly good taste. He was even more bothered by the almost-unibrow that gave him all the grace and elegance of a wolf man.

It hadn't taken much effort to find what he needed for his transformation in one of the small towns they'd passed through on their way to New Orleans. Iga had handled everything quickly and reliably. Mercant, on the other hand, possessed the necessary knowledge for how to use those materials most effectively.

Now his facial skin was darker and his hair bleached. His eyes stood out, large and gray under horn-rimmed glasses. He doubted even his mother would have recognized him if she had been sitting in front of him at a restaurant. He resembled the picture in his fake ID to a T. Except for the small scar at the corner of the mouth, which Anthony Reivers must have received many years ago.

"How far to New Orleans?" he asked.

"Four hundred miles. A stone's throw, considering the distance we've already covered."

For a while, they continued in silence, then Allan said, "I'm hungry."

Iga took one hand off the steering wheel and put it on her stomach. "When did we last eat?"

“At that dirty truck stop.”

Wonderbra pulled a face. She probably remembered the overly greasy burger and the glop they’d been sold as mayonnaise. That had been shortly before the first roadblock.

“Then it’s high time. I won’t make the full four hundred miles without getting gas again anyway. On this occasion, we should fill our stomachs as well, don’t you think? At least if the world doesn’t end by then.” She laughed.

Mercant, however, didn’t find it funny at all. “What does the media say?”

The trucker activated the news crawl at the bottom of the windshield and switched on the autopilot in order to focus on reading. Allan could barely look at it since the display was directed at the driver’s seat.

“Threats,” said Iga. “Hysteria. On the net, everyone is murmuring about a coming war. The balance is tilting, Allan. And something is wrong with the Moon mission; everyone is aware of it. That’s probably the straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

“Something...” Mercant repeated thoughtfully. “We both know exactly what that is.”

“Okay,” she murmured quietly, even though she didn’t sound convinced. “I’ve thought about everything again. After everything you told me, Allan, these aliens are pure speculation, aren’t they? You risked your life and your whole existence because of this *Stardust*’s flight.”

“And I would do it again! What’s happening up there is the real disaster! If the bomb actually explodes and destroys the aliens’ ship, it will be...”

“You don’t even know if they exist!” In Iga’s voice there was barely suppressed anger. “These are assumptions that you are totally convinced of, but you have nothing in your hands to prove it. How can you throw away your whole life for that?”

“Pictures of...”

“They don’t prove anything!”

“Rhodan and the rest of the crew have long since reached the Moon and seen it with their own eyes.”

“The ship is missing on the dark side of the Moon. You gave up everything, Allan! For a pipe dream.”

“For *my* dream,” he corrected her. “For the goal of space travel that’s so close now and will end in doom if nothing comes of it! I

had to act, don't you understand?"

He wondered why he was even arguing with her about it. What connected them anyway? They had met by chance, although they had become...more intimate than he was with most other people he knew. He rarely let anybody get that close anymore, either directly or figuratively.

"I have my feet on the ground," said Iga. "This truck is my world; this job is the meaning of my life. I see our society going to the dogs because no one gives a damn anymore and can't look beyond their own nose!"

"That's probably the difference between us," Mercant answered softly. "And still, maybe that's why you can understand me, Wonderbra! Think about it. You're part of a community—the truckers are like a family to you, as you said yourself. I feel the same way. I'm part of a family that longs for the stars and sees space travel as our future. I've confided in people from the other side of the world. They thought the same, gave their lives for it, and I was saved. Now do you seriously believe that I could doubt, with a single fiber of my being, what is happening up there on the Moon? Contact has been made, and I simply don't believe that Perry Rhodan and the others are dead."

Instead of an answer, Iga slammed the brakes. "Let's talk later!"

Only then did he look at the road. Once again, they were approaching a roadblock, as if the government could change anything that way. Or was this effort that Homeland Security was making all about him? Did they want to get a hold of him at all costs?

Regardless, his escape was not that important. Maybe these roadblocks were only a sign of general paranoia, a vague feeling that something was in the air, that disaster was brewing. A helpless activism on the part of those in power who had reached their limits because they saw no other way and just wanted to do *something*.

Two soldiers were approaching. They carried machine guns, and their expressions were empty and waxy. The younger one had fear written all over his face.

"Your IDs," demanded the second soldier without taking his hands off the handle of the machine gun.

Mercant didn't feel as if he were in the center of the United States. Rather, he remembered his earlier stays in Asian countries where such patrols were a daily occurrence. Wordlessly, he handed

the soldier the fake documents. Iga showed her passport as well.

"And now the cargo documents!"

Iga dug up the little pad that acknowledged her last delivery in Nevada. "I've been driving empty since then. There's a big job waiting in New Orleans. When can we continue?"

"Driving across the whole country without a load?"

"Do you mind?"

"It seems strange to me."

"We were on vacation," she lied. "A road trip through our homeland. And now..."

"All right," the soldier interrupted. Apparently, he wasn't in the mood to listen to a lengthy story. "Open the loading space."

"Listen, I..."

The barrel of the MP moved up a little. "Open it!"

How fortunate that they had nothing to hide. Mercant was just glad that the attention had shifted to the truck and not to him as a person.

While the older soldier stayed next to them, the younger one busied himself with the loading space. Iga opened it by pressing a button. The examination only took a few seconds.

"It's empty. Drive on!"

The two men moved to the next car. Iga accelerated. The roadblock left just enough room on the side.

"After that scare, we should really stop and get something to eat at the next possible chance," Allan decided.

Five minutes later they were driving through the outskirts of a small town. And the first thing they saw was a group of people jumping from the roof of a skyscraper.

A body hit the road right in front of them, another crashed onto the roof of the truck because Iga couldn't brake fast enough.

"What..."

That was all she managed to get out before the vehicle came to a stop. Mercant flung open the passenger door and darted out into the open. He found himself standing in front of a corpse and a second body with arms and legs protruding at grotesque angles slid off the roof behind him. Blood ran down the side of the truck.

As Iga stepped out, three more people tumbled down. Mercant froze for a moment, horrified. Then he pulled himself together, uttered a curse, and ran to the entrance of the skyscraper. More

were up there. He could see them behind the little barrier, which two women were currently climbing over.

The door was locked. He rang the bell desperately. Behind him, something smacked the ground. Sirens were wailing in the distance. Then a buzzer sounded.

Mercant pushed the door open before the first questions came through the intercom, rushed down the hallway without turning around, and hurried up the stairs. What was he even doing? His actions were anything but inconspicuous, and he couldn't risk drawing attention to himself. After all, he was on the run with a fake identity.

But he shook off the thought as well as the question of what he was supposed to do once he reached the roof. Was somebody forcing these people to jump to their deaths? If so, why? And why were there no police on the scene? This couldn't have happened without some preparation—without a demand or an ultimatum from the criminals.

"Stop right there," he heard a voice say behind him, at least one flight of stairs below. Iga.

He hastened on, taking two steps at a time. Physically, he felt the calm of a thousand missions of an agent's life.

"Dammit, Allan, stop! They're killing themselves!"

He paused. A chill ran down his spine, and he almost thought he could physically feel the omnipresent death.

"They're committing suicide!" shouted Iga. "And they're not the first!"

He suddenly remembered the wave of cult suicides in the American southwest. Could this be...

"It's been happening everywhere for hours!" Iga's voice blared mercilessly. "Since the media started sharing rumors about aliens. Something has been leaked by a dozen supposedly secret groups!"

"So what?" he shouted. "We still have to save them!"

"They don't want our help!"

He reached the top floor. Where did the stairs continue? Where exactly was the access to the roof? There had to at least be an emergency ladder...

A hand grabbed him. A voice, close to his ear. "You can't get involved! We have to get out of here!"

"But..."

"They're all dead by now anyway. They're doing it fast and

consistently like all the insane groups around the country and all over the world. Now let's go, before the police grill us!"

"Your truck is smeared with blood! We can't just disappear."

She stared at him, her gaze fluttering. That was when he regained his composure. He knew what to do.

"You go down and sort it out. Tell the truth, but leave me out. Let's meet again in two hours on the other side of town in the direction of New Orleans. I'll find you."

She nodded wordlessly.

Then Allan Mercant, alias Anthony Reivers, rushed down the staircase again. At least a dozen people were standing in the halls, more doors flying open as he passed.

He reached the building's exterior, looked around briefly, and disappeared down a side street.

The giga truck was standing in a parking lot close to the sign that signaled the outer limits of the small town.

The outer limits.

The end.

Just like these suicide waves and the mounting panic and hysteria around the world signaled the end of the past. The beginning of something new.

And that future began now; what they were observing were the labor pains of this birth that would destroy the old order of things. Something new was breaking through violently. Mercant sensed it. It was in the air, even more than the mere escalation of worldly powers and animosities. Something that had a connection to what had happened on the Moon.

He stepped over to a window of the truck and knocked. Iga sat inside. She turned around. Her eyes shimmered wetly; she had been crying. A tear still clung to her nostril.

There was a click, the door swung open, and Iga got out. "Glad you're here."

With a casual movement she wiped her face. For an instant, Allan wanted to say something but decided against it. Silently, he followed her to the restaurant on the other side of the parking lot.

They entered, and a thousand voices inundated them. Nobody seemed to talk quietly. Everyone was engaged in vivid discussion, and most kept looking over to stare at the big screen that hung in one of the corners. It showed a news anchor whose words were

coming through the loudspeakers on every table. He was talking about military troop deployments in Great Russia, of summits in China and Taiwan. In the Japanese slums there was a curfew in effect. In several insignificant countries, fights had broken out—so far only a side note.

"Are you still hungry?" asked Iga.

Mercant shook his head but sat down at one of the few empty tables. Everywhere around he was seeing pale and shaken faces.

A woman cried. "There was a corpse right outside my window," she told a young man.

A waiter came running. Mercant and Iga ordered the dish of the day without asking what it was, along with water and coffee. Mercant suppressed his urgent craving for schnapps. Now wasn't the time.

Suddenly, the anchor's report stopped. His gaze flickered unsteadily through the studio, then the man turned around, reached for his tie, and loosened the knot.

"We are receiving a message right now. From...the *Stardust*." It sounded as if he couldn't believe it himself. "We'll go live to you now. It's live, we... It seems like the *Stardust* is beginning its descent to Earth. These...these are the words of the astronaut Perry Rhodan."

It clicked and a slightly distorted, rustling voice resounded.

It filled not only their room, but billions of others on Earth.

Splinter of Development (9)

Radio conversation between Perry Rhodan in the *Stardust* capsule and Flight Director Lesly Pounder. Conducted during the descent of the *Stardust* to Earth. Parallel to that, an image was transmitted, showing the alien Crest da Zoltral.

Received by countless news stations. Effective reach through retransmission: ninety-eight percent of the Earth's population.

"...come in, please! *Stardust*, please come in! *Star*... Rhodan, you're alive! Thank God! We'd given up all hope for you and your men. We... Rhodan, what kind of being is that?"

"His name is Crest da Zoltral. He's an Arkonide—and a friend of humanity. I wanted to introduce Crest before I head off. It's all thanks to people like you that we had the honor of meeting him and the Arkonides. Goodbye, Pounder!"

"Excuse me? What... What the hell do you mean by..."

Interlude

Perry Rhodan's first night in the Gobi Desert

The smell of fine leather hung in the air. Lesly Pounder only registered it subconsciously; the tense silence in the spacious office seemed to almost smother the NASA Flight Director. No sound entered the perfectly isolated windows of the White House from outside either. The vibrant life of the capital seemed miles away.

Across from him, behind a wide desk, sat arguably the mightiest man in the world who, in these hours more than ever, held the fate of billions in his hands. If he made the wrong decision, there would be war, where nuclear explosions in a multitude of places around the globe could lead to the end of all things.

Still, the President of the United States, Stanley Drummond, seemed downright relaxed. He didn't look his sixty years, not even under these circumstances. He had maintained a young appearance, a smile that shone in the media, that inspired trust. He was a man who stood for a long outdated way of thinking, according to Pounder. For Drummond, the United States represented goodness itself and was therefore obligated to take the lead in world affairs.

Pounder had always seen it differently, even more so since he knew that an alien spaceship had landed on the Moon. He wondered why Drummond had ordered him back with Air Force One. Of course, it had to do with the return of the *Stardust*, but why...

"Mr. Pounder, what do you think of this?"

The President pushed a button on his desk. There was a click, and out of the polished wooden panel emerged a flat screen showing the *Stardust*, which had landed in the Gobi Desert. The image was coarse and blurred; the individual pixels seemed washed out.

"These are images from a spy satellite. The autonomous drones that could have provided better material were destroyed by Chinese defenses before they could send any pictures."

The image changed and showed a fuzzy video sequence of the spacecraft barreling through the upper layers of the atmosphere. If Pounder wasn't mistaken, explosive devices hissed right past it before the craft briefly disappeared from view. But the camera of the spy satellite found it again, and shortly afterwards, the NASA Flight Director witnessed the landing of the returning space capsule. The video ended with an image that he already knew.

"Well?" the President asked.

"A very successful landing on difficult terrain," commented Pounder. "Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull are the best pilots at NASA's— and thus the entire USA's—disposal."

"It was them," Stanley Drummond replied coolly. "They are traitors and have lost their status as Americans, to put it plainly. They are no longer our pilots." The calm abruptly disappeared from his face. "The Arkonide technology must fall into American hands; otherwise it will be a catastrophe!" The president's hands clenched into fists and beat the edge of the desk. His knuckles stood out stark white.

Pounder was not surprised by the outburst. Drummond was under enormous pressure. Not only was the current crisis weighing on him but also the upcoming elections. In the fall, he would have to face his contenders. But at this point, he was the man who would shape their country's history for all time simply because he had been in power when the unthinkable had happened. Whatever came next, he was responsible for the consequences. And he would reap the rewards, provided he was reelected.

Power, thought Pounder. It corrupts and tends to become an end in itself. This was no different to him than NASA's own structure. But it didn't change the fact that the restricted viewpoint of the President shocked and angered him at the same time. Drummond seemed to him like a fossil from a bygone era that had ended a couple of hours ago. Most of humanity didn't even know it yet, although everyone was suffering from the strain of the changing times. But for Pounder, the space travel enthusiast, it was already an eternity ago. All his thinking and effort was now directed towards the future. Towards space and the contact with the Arkonides...and—he shuddered—possibly other nations among the stars.

To him, it was obvious that everything was new. How could a man like Drummond not understand that? Didn't someone with the

power of the American president also have to feel that this was the dawn of a new age?

"We must contain this crisis, Mr. Pounder," Drummond continued. "The *Stardust* and everything on board belongs to the United States. I will officially claim it from China. This has long been done on internal channels, but China remains silent."

What else? Pounder thought, but he too kept quiet.

"China refuses," Drummond said. "They're saying the *Stardust* unlawfully landed on their country's soil. Moreover, the Russians are demanding that the spacecraft and, more importantly, the alien, be handed over to the UN."

"A shrewd move," Pounder commented. "In doing so, they have become the spokesperson for the rest of the nations who are supporting the motion..."

"...supporting it, of course!"

The president angrily fished a bottle of water from a cooler carafe and poured some into a waiting glass. It spilled over. A puddle formed on the desk. Gruffly, he passed the bottle to his guest, but Pounder ignored the gesture.

The President didn't drink.

"Demands are currently being made through diplomatic channels. The public hasn't gotten a look. Yet. That will change soon enough, though."

"The truth cannot be suppressed," the flight director asserted with conviction.

His remark was met with a sneer.

"Is that so? After all, you understand what power is, Mr. Pounder. The truth has been suppressed for decades whenever it matters. But let's not talk about that. That's not why I called you here."

Now it was getting interesting. They were approaching the decisive point.

"Why, then?"

"In this situation, the United States has to be prepared. In every conceivable way, and no matter what is to come. As President, I have sworn an oath to protect and lead this nation, and that's exactly what I intend to do. But for that, I need your help."

"What can I do? The Gobi is far outside my area of influence and..."

"Stop, Mr. Pounder! You are NASA's flight director. The Gobi is

irrelevant. A side stage, even if that's not yet obvious. The entire world is concentrating on it, and that's their mistake. It's a shallow point of view. Maybe the Chinese will destroy the defensive shield and reduce everything to ashes."

"How can you speak so coldly about this?" Pounder demanded. "The lives of four of our astronauts are at stake, and besides..."

The president waved him off. "A side stage, as I just said. There is an alien there. A single alien, and inside the *Stardust* maybe a handful of technical gear. Sure, under different circumstances, you'd have to try to get your hands on it. But..." He paused.

It suddenly dawned on Pounder why the President had summoned him. A chill ran down his spine. He felt as if a clamp around his heart had been squeezed tight. It couldn't be! The *Stardust* mission had already been sheer lunacy—a hasty and technologically unrehearsed hell of a ride with a new rocket type that had demanded NASA's last resources. Surely Drummond couldn't possibly...

"I don't want the consolation prize," the president continued, "I want the jackpot."

"You want..."

"The center of the action is not the Gobi," the president said as if to a child who required extra patience, "but the Moon. There, a dozen times more of what's inside the *Stardust* is waiting. Get a second lunar mission ready, Mr. Pounder. As quickly as possible. I don't care how. And don't you give me any ridiculous excuses like saying that it's impossible."

Without being asked, Pounder stood up and nodded, although a thousand objections flashed through his mind, of which the word "impossible" was the least. "Yes, Sir."

For the first time since he had greeted him, Drummond showed a small smile. "The whole nation is relying on you, Mr. Pounder!"

But the Flight Director hardly heard him. A second mission to the Moon. It was madness, and yet—he couldn't deny it—strikingly logical.

10.

June 28, 2036,
The day after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

"So, the general is keeping his word."

Like Perry Rhodan, Clark Flipper was lingering in the shadow of the improvised tent roof that the four astronauts had assembled from their emergency parachutes. Stones weighed down the lower strips of material.

"Who would have thought?"

"Me," Rhodan returned placidly.

"Has anybody ever told you that you're a hopeless optimist?"

"Most recently, General Bai Jun, albeit in different words and less kindly." He nodded. "As you can see, I'm right."

Flipper waved him off. "Sometimes." He looked unwell, tired and wasted. "Not that you think it might be inconvenient. We could certainly use that diagnostic device."

"Let's hope Manoli can make use of it. Crest's condition worries me. He's getting weaker and weaker."

"You *are* going to check the device to see if it's been tampered with, aren't you? Bai Jun could smuggle in a bomb or..."

"Of course, I'll keep my eyes open, Clark," Rhodan interrupted. "Although I don't expect it. Bai Jun will find another way to defeat us. Or break us."

The strips of canopy protected the area around the *Stardust* not only from direct sunlight but from the all-too-curious stares of the besiegers and the recordings of several spy satellites that were by now probably circling in orbit far above.

The two men were standing in such a way that they could see through a gap between the tent panels to the gleam of the protective field and beyond into the desert.

A jeep drew close and stopped directly ahead. Bai Jun got out while two soldiers fiddled with the loading area of the car and hoisted a high-tech stretcher from it. From afar, Rhodan couldn't

make out any details except that there were some lateral attachments and drawers underneath the reclining area.

He nodded to Flipper. “I’ll go get it.”

“You shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

“But first, Clark... How do you feel?”

“How am I supposed to feel?

“You’re thinking about Beth. Worrying about her wears you down, to put it mildly.”

“You know I’m not that sentimental. I’ve had many women in my life and...”

“Don’t lie.”

Flipper didn’t lower his gaze but looked him straight in the eyes. “It makes me sick that she’s dead.”

“Missing,” corrected Rhodan. “Her expedition has gone missing in the Himalayas; that doesn’t mean...”

“Even worse,” Flipper cut in. “I can’t bear it any longer, Perry. To be stuck here while I don’t even know if she’s alive or dead or freezing to death this very minute! I can’t do anything!”

“It won’t be long now.”

“Nice words. Only you don’t seem to believe them yourself. Because of the shield, the Chinese may not be able to destroy us, but we’re trapped here.”

Rhodan wanted to reply, but he kept silent. He couldn’t find any encouraging words that didn’t sound like hollow lies. To begin with, he had to find out whether Bai Jun had attached any conditions to the transfer of the diagnostic stretcher for Crest.

He bid them a brief goodbye and asked Flipper to inform the Arkonide so that he could make the necessary preparations. Then Rhodan slid through the small gap between the tent panels, bending them aside, and approached the inner edge of the energy shield. He soon found himself facing his adversary.

General Bai Jun pointed towards the diagnostic stretcher that the two soldiers had placed next to him. It allowed for patient transport on six wheels, even though it was not primarily designed for that purpose. The actual reclining area was undoubtedly stabilized by a suspension system so that the patient wouldn’t be jolted while moving.

“This the best the market has to offer,” the general said in a cool voice. “The electrodes in the head frame record a terabyte of biological data during the first exam. The medical scan of the

diagnostic device generates real images of cross-sections throughout the patient's body. Furthermore, a pharmaceutically automated drug administration based on the measurements is included. The magazine is filled with the standard remedies so that direct and immediate help can be given for thirty percent of all diseases. Let me know if you have any other wishes, Rhodan, and I'll get the drugs to you."

"Thank you!"

The astronaut refrained from revealing any further information. The stretcher was supposed to provide a more accurate diagnosis of Crest's condition. Back on the Moon, Dr. Manoli had examined the alien with the help of the on-board hospital, but that had not been equipped for diseases such as the one afflicting their guest. By pure patient observation, Manoli had diagnosed him with leukemia. They would soon know whether he could find out more. But Bai Jun couldn't be allowed to know of the Arkonide's impairment and its accompanying weakness.

"I really appreciate the gesture, General."

"And now?" asked the officer. "How am I supposed to hand this to you through the shield?"

"Just let me worry about that."

"Don't overestimate my generosity."

This was the first sign of annoyance in the general's behavior. Rhodan now knew that Bai Jun would never give up the reins completely and wouldn't accept one thing: condescension or even questions about his power or position.

"Crest will activate a so-called structural gap," he explained. "He already knows that we're standing here. I can take the device through this gap. The shield won't let any explosives pass, by the way," he lied, watching his opponent's reaction closely.

The general laughed. "My adjutant suggested that I rig the stretcher. But I decided against it, so there's no need for concern, Mr. Rhodan. And now, let me speak to the Arkonide."

"I will inform him of your request."

For an instant, the mask of friendly detachment disappeared, and anger sparkled in Bai Jun's eyes... Another indication that he didn't usually make requests but rather gave the orders. His words were normally met with unconditional obedience. But the moment passed as quickly as it had come.

"I am not used to being treated like a supplicant," he admitted

to Rhodan's surprise.

"I understand."

A slight buzz sounded and directly in front of the stretcher, the color of the glow in the air changed. A glimmering reddish field formed, precisely matching the dimensions of the diagnostic device. At the edges, it almost looked as if little flames were moving across the shield.

Without another word, Bai Jun pushed the stretcher through. It didn't seem to encounter any resistance. When it passed the structural gap, the red glow rippled. It was reminiscent of a stone falling onto the surface of the water, casting circular waves.

Rhodan accepted the gift and rolled it over to the *Stardust*. Under the improvised canopy, Clark Flipper was nowhere to be seen. After he had asked Crest to activate the structural gap, he had probably withdrawn to a different, supposedly calmer place to think and be alone. Or as alone as one could be when the attention of an entire hostile army and perhaps numerous news stations was focused on one. Or perhaps he was still with the others in the control room.

Rhodan placed the portable diagnostic device directly in front of the *Stardust*'s entrance. Inside, he found Reginald Bull working on the Arkonide's formchair. He had removed the outer paneling, and shiny metal pieces were lying under and on top of the built-in astronaut seats. Bull had squeezed himself into the legroom in front of the chairs to somehow find room to reach the new technology.

"I'm trying to repair the defensive field that protects Crest from contact with our air."

Bull pointed at the interior of the chair—a thousand wires, connections, and components that no human had ever seen. Of course not. Some seemed so small and yet so complicated that even the most advanced terrestrial microtechnology looked like amateur work in comparison.

"I'm becoming fed up with it!"

"Is that surprising, Reg?" asked Rhodan. "We need time to understand what..."

"I'm no beginner when it comes to technology!"

"That's a slight understatement, Reg. You easily outplay just about everyone."

"And yet I'm not getting anywhere here."

"Your colleague is right," said Crest, who was still spread out

on the fully reclined chair, trying to give Bull the room he needed. “Even the most capable engineers need a long training period to become acquainted with the technology of an alien civilization!”

Bull kept silent and returned to his task with a tight expression. The Arkonide’s words didn’t seem to particularly comfort him.

Crest turned to the pilot. “Listen, I understand that you probably won’t be able to help me in that regard. But I appreciate your efforts.”

When Reginald showed no reaction apart from an unintelligible mumbling, Rhodan chimed in. “I thank you for activating the structural gap in the shield. For you, it might be a daily routine, but it impressed me and no doubt Bai Jun as well, although he didn’t let on.”

“It wasn’t my intention to demonstrate my technological superiority.”

Rhodan smiled. “In the general’s case it’s certainly useful for him to see how inferior he is to our—to Arkonide technology.”

Bull looked up from his work. “Still, he managed to limit us severely.”

That didn’t sound good at all. Rhodan already sensed the next disaster on the horizon. “What are you getting at, Reg?”

“The Chinese have set up interfering transmitters. We can neither send nor receive messages. We’re isolated in the best and worst sense. Or captured. However you want to put it.”

Rhodan had foreseen that. “General Bai Jun is smart enough to know how to strategically conduct a siege. I didn’t expect anything less. For an information junkie like you, this type of isolation isn’t exactly pleasant, is it?” he tried to joke.

“Even on our flight to the Moon I knew how the tense situation on Earth was becoming,” said Bull. “Is that enough of an answer for you?”

Rhodan remembered how Bull had woken up after the deep sleep phase and done nothing but study the latest news in world politics.

Before he could reply, Dr. Manoli entered the room, standing at the entrance. “I’d like to take a look at the diagnostic stretcher. Will you accompany me?”

Rhodan nodded and turned towards him.

Bull remained behind. “Meanwhile, I’ll be dealing with this technology here. Still better than doing nothing but waiting.”

“I have a plan, Reg.”

“And? Out with it!”

“Let me think some more and see how things turn out. We’re safe; that’s more than we could have hoped for.”

“I’ll try to help you repair it, Mr. Bull,” Crest offered, “but although the technology of this chair may be my people’s work, it is unfamiliar to me.”

The alien coughed, and when Rhodan glanced at him as he left the room, he thought the color of Crest’s eyes was a different sort of red than it had been a short while ago. They seemed bloodshot and ill.

“I have examined him with the limited resources on board,” Manoli said to Rhodan when they stepped outside. The tent panels stretched all around, anchored to both the space capsule and the ground. “The striking similarities between humans and Arkonides are fascinating, but there are also clear differences. Just take our ribs and the bone plate that Crest has instead.”

The otherwise inconspicuous man with black hair was suddenly radiating charisma. You could tell how much the strange biology and unique opportunity it presented thrilled him. In this respect the contact with Crest had to be incredibly valuable to him. Yet worry was written all over his face.

“Thanks to my special knowledge of cellular changes, I diagnosed him with leukemia on the Moon.”

“And you’re sticking with that assessment?”

The doctor nodded. “I’ve been able to do a simple genetic study. There are remarkable similarities between humans and Arkonides! However, his leukemia seems to be a special anomaly. Maybe it’s because he is not human after all, despite the similarities. That’s why he might show slightly different symptoms.”

“You’re lacking anything for comparison,” Rhodan mentioned.

“It’s possibly an already known form of leukemia. Of course, I don’t know everything either, and I didn’t have a way to access any databases here, not to mention the lack of possibility of making a detailed diagnosis!” He flashed a crooked grin, And before Rhodan could reply, Manoli rushed over to the diagnostic stretcher. “But that’s going to change now. Fantastic! Bai Jun went all-out, Perry. This is the best you can find.”

“You know this device?”

“It’s top-of-the-line—did I already say that? Recently designed by Dr. Frank Haggard. He donated the plans for it to all of humanity.”

“Open source,” Rhodan muttered thoughtfully. An invention that everybody could use without the inventor or his company receiving any money for it. A gift to anyone on Earth who needed it. He liked the idea, which triggered a whole chain of associations in his mind.

“If I can find out anything more about Crest’s disease, it’s with this.” Manoli stroked the device with an almost tender gesture over the head frame, a construction of delicate, roundly bent metal rods and wires that ended in small probes. A transparent plastic covering protected it.

Suddenly, a piercing scream resounded, and the light around them turned red.

Perry Rhodan rushed out from under the tent panels to see what had happened.

The sight staggered him. The iridescence of the defensive shield over him had changed, but in a totally different way from before when Crest had activated the structural gap. It seemed…uncontrolled. Flashes of lightning quivered around it, the color morphing to a pale, dull green.

Manoli and Bull also hurried outside. In the light filtering through the shield, their faces seemed rotten, almost dead. The whites of their eyes shone fluorescently in what appeared to be green skin.

A moment later, the scream ended abruptly. Total silence set in, apart from the ringing in Rhodan’s ears, reverberations from the noise. Bull’s mouth moved, but he couldn’t hear what his friend was shouting. Until his gaze followed the pilot’s outstretched arm. It pointed at the defensive shield generator. And to the man who had just broken away from it and started running.

Clark Flipper.

It hit Rhodan like an electric shock. With a pop in his ears, the world of sound came crashing back down on him.

“Take care of the generator, Reg,” he yelled and sprinted off.

He had to stop his colleague. Flipper ran towards the energy dome, which was suddenly bubbling all over like the churning surface of a bog. One of those bubbles, more than two meters in

diameter, was just above the ground. Flipper headed straight for it.

The bubble continued to expand, and light refracted within it in rainbow colors. Intuitively, Rhodan knew that the defensive shield would collapse. And then the bubble did indeed burst.

The astronaut was only one meter behind his colleague. He went for broke and pushed off for a giant leap. Strands of light buzzed in the burst bubble and trickled down like rain as seemingly solid matter. Some of those lights went out during this bizarre dance.

Rhodan bumped into Flipper at full speed, pulling him down with him. Both men crashed to the ground. One of the strands dripped right into Rhodan's eye. He didn't feel anything but was bedazzled for a moment. Flecks of light danced before him, stealing his vision. A fist bumped against his chin.

"You have no right!" Clark Flipper's voice almost broke with agitation.

Rhodan raised his arm for an elbow check. He felt resistance, heard a scream of pain. His gaze cleared again. Instantly, he braced his left forearm against his companion's chest and pushed the other man away.

Flipper flew to the side and remained lying on his back, helpless like a fish that had been washed up from the ocean. Tears ran down his face.

"You have no right," he repeated, but more quietly this time. The shield behind him fluctuated, and a final spark, shining yellow-gold, rained to the ground.

Perry Rhodan pushed himself onto his feet. His colleague seemed to have returned to his senses. He bent down towards Flipper to help him up. Again, the scream sounded, and the shield finally collapsed. The iridescent glow expired.

Flipper kicked Rhodan in the knees, causing him to fall to the ground with a cry, then rolled to the side and crawled away on all fours. Unchallenged, he reached the spot where the dome had just arched.

He picked himself up and ran to freedom.

Or directly to his doom.

Splinter of Development (10)

Protocol for the release of Prof. Dr. Hermann Langke, lecturer at the Chair for Social Competence and Viral Network Marketing at New York University. Not recorded anywhere, written down by Prof. Langke from memory. The conversation took place six hours after the landing of the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert.

"You're free, Mr. Langke."

HL: "But..."

"Go, and don't ask any questions."

HL: "What happened? Since I've been arrested, why have I not been allowed to send..."

"Go. I hereby apologize on behalf of Homeland Security for the circumstances that have arisen due to an erroneous assumption."

HL: "Circumstances? That's all? You just call it 'circumstances' and want me to go home? You deprived me of my freedom and..."

"Let me put it more clearly: get out of here, or I'll sue you for obstructing Homeland Security at a time when the agency is needed in a thousand places at once!"

HL: "I protest!"

[A laugh.] "Yeah, go for it."

11.

June 28, 2036,
The day after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

A large stone emerged from the ground in front of him. General Bai Jun swung the wheel of the jeep around. The tires squeaked; sand flew to the side. For a moment, the vehicle bucked up, as if it wanted to continue on two wheels.

Adjutant He Jian-Dong uttered a startled scream, but instead of braking, Bai Jun hit the gas. The engine howled in protest, then the general got the vehicle back under control. They sped on until the tires spun on a loose plain of salt.

"General, you..."

"Quiet!" Bai Jun braked harshly, then gave a controlled throttle and switched on the extra thrust. The car positively shot out of the trap, shooting down the hill in the direction of the defensive shield. Or the place where, until seconds before, the apparently eternal glistening dome had spanned.

A flickering firework had caught the attention of all the soldiers a few moments earlier. Immediately, He Jian-Dong had rushed into the general's command tent, informed him of the unbelievable events, and obtained permission to see what was going on. And while Bai Jun had sped off with him, the shield had thrown out a number of bubbles and then collapsed. Whatever was happening there, he had to be on the ground for it.

"How long?" he shouted against the whipping headwind of the open jeep.

He Jian-Dong answered promptly, "The dome collapsed fifteen seconds ago! General, take the opportunity! Let the troops fire! We can destroy the craft and..."

"Shut up!" Bai Jun's voice brooked no objection.

The American space capsule shone in the light of the morning sun. The orange-red rays refracted on the metal in a way that had not been possible before because the energy shield had been

covering it.

The soldiers' camp fell behind them. He Jian-Dong touched his ear, where he was always connected to the network via the receiver, and picked up messages as they went.

"The officers are awaiting your orders, General."

"Tell them to keep waiting," Bai Jun said harshly. His hands clutched the steering wheel. The speedometer needle continued to climb as they bumped across the desert ground.

Still five hundred meters to the *Stardust*. Were there two figures at the edge of the shield there?

The officer floored the accelerator; the engine roared. Three hundred meters left, at most.

Two men were indeed fighting. Perry Rhodan grabbed his colleague Clark Flipper and flung him around, back towards the *Stardust*. Flipper tripped, flailing his arms to regain his balance, but Rhodan gave him a push in the back that sent him crashing to the ground—within the area that had, until recently, been protected by the energy shield. The shield that was now rising again, shimmering and flickering.

A glistening buzz shot up in a dome shape and closed over the *Stardust* at almost the same instant.

Bai Jun's car was too close. Way too close.

The general's foot hammered the brake. The tires locked; the rear end swerved. The suspension squeaked, sounding almost like the cry of an animal. He jerked the wheel around, and this time the car actually took off halfway from the ground. He Jian-Dong screamed and in a pointless gesture wrenched his hands above his head, as if he could protect himself should they flip over.

Bai Jun, however, concentrated on the controls. The vehicle shot by the newly re-formed protective dome with only a few centimeters to spare. He thought he could hear the hum of an electrical current and seemed to feel it on his skin. Actual contact would probably have shattered them as much as a collision with a massive wall.

For an instant, the general looked in the direction of the camp around the hill where the command tent sat. Helicopters were circling above it, and some approached the *Stardust*. A space fighter took off from the improvised runway nearby.

And that was without him, Bai Jun, having given the order.

"Call them off!" he snapped at his adjutant. "Tell them to turn

around and land immediately, or I will make an example of you and the first head will roll in ten minutes!”

He stopped the car, turned around, and drove back to the dome, towards the two men whose fight he had witnessed. He no longer cared about He Jian-Dong or what was happening at the camp; there were more important things for him to observe.

Apparently, the temporary outage of the shield had not been due to a general failure but rather an attempted escape by the astronaut Clark Flipper. The scene told its own tale. The general recalled what he knew about the man; his file was far less insightful and extensive than that of his superior, Perry Rhodan. But Flipper seemed to be the most unstable, the least morally sound member of the crew.

Bai Jun stopped the car as close as possible to the spot where the two astronauts were tumbling towards each other beyond the defensive field. They had stopped their fight, and a third man—Reginald Bull, born 1999, system administrator and co-pilot—rushed over.

“It could have cut through us,” Flipper said, but his last word was drowned out by the red-haired Bull.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” the latter shouted. Anger was written all over his face.

Very good. General Bai Jun watched these proceedings complacently.

“We’re retreating!” ordered Rhodan.

Bai Jun smiled. Things were developing faster than he had thought in exactly the direction he had foreseen. This small group that had found refuge under the protection of the dome was under enormous pressure. It had only been a matter of time before the first, the weakest of them, would break down under that pressure. And that seemed to be Clark Flipper.

“Mr. Rhodan,” the general called.

The astronaut turned to face him.

Bai Jun said only three words before accelerating and steering the jeep back towards the camp.

“I am waiting.”

“They’re standing at the tent entrance,” He Jian-Dong informed him a few minutes later.

The general almost regretted that the pilots in charge had

obeyed the order to retreat. A summary execution might have been a good way to maintain discipline. It wasn't only the American astronauts who were under extreme pressure; so were his soldiers. And even Bai Jun himself, for that matter, but he wouldn't lose his cool.

"How many?"

His adjutant didn't have to think about his answer. As usual, he had already prepared everything to the general's satisfaction. "Eight pilots and the sub-army commander in charge."

Bai Jun took a sip of the mushroom drink and rose from his seat.

"Shall I leave, General?"

"No; you stay with me." The wooden floor creaked quietly as he strode slowly and deliberately towards the exit. Those nine fools could probably hear him approaching and were now worrying about their future. Well, they should. This was an unusual situation where he could obtain permission for anything with a simple call.

He stepped outside. The soldiers stood side by side, ramrod straight. Their faces remained expressionless.

"You will never launch another attack without my explicit orders." Bai Jun didn't raise his voice; there was no need. In this silence, even the faintest whisper would have been heard. The whole area around them seemed like a ghost camp. "The eight pilots can go; they will be demoted. And now we come to you, sub-army commander."

The soldier's lips formed a tight line.

"I will give you credit for reacting immediately to the order to retreat. Therefore, you have avoided execution. Nevertheless, for disregarding the chain of command, I hereby dismiss you from the army, effective immediately. And before that, you'll have a three-month detention. He Jian-Dong, my personal adjutant, will make sure that you are taken away from here."

By the time the other had confirmed with a short "General!" Bai Jun had already turned around and walked back into the tent. He had neither the desire nor the time to busy himself longer than necessary with this annoying incident.

The last few minutes had proven one thing: Rhodan's group would not withstand the psychological pressure in the long term and he, Bai Jun, had to see to it that his own people didn't lose their nerve as besiegers prematurely.

Ultimately, this mission was not only about the future of the world but about something far more important. It was about his own success.

And he would prove his worth through this ordeal.

Splinter of Development (11)

Obituary in the New York Times, June 28, 2036:

We mourn the loss of George Townsend, beloved husband, father and son.

He will be missed.

George fell victim to a terrible accident.

We miss you.

With love, your family.

12.

Shortly after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

There was a bewildered silence; it was almost as calm as being in the eye of a hurricane that was wreaking havoc all around, crushing houses and taking people's lives.

Allan D. Mercant felt as if he were in a bubble where time stood still. The surrounding universe continued to spin, but he was lost in timelessness. Perry Rhodan's words, broadcast from every speaker in the restaurant, were proof that he had not been mistaken. That it was right, according to Iga's assessment, to risk his life and chuck it all out. That his dream, his yearning for the stars had always had some basis.

The silence ended with the sound of a plate falling and breaking, followed first by the shuffling of chairs on the floor, then by shattering glass.

Mercant turned around and saw the woman causing the noise. She took a step backwards. Broken glass crunched beneath her feet.

"Aliens!" she shrieked, throwing herself around and running for the exit.

As if that made any sense. But her escape, for which there was neither a reason nor an occasion, acted as an initial spark. More people jumped up, talking all at once. Somewhere, somebody shouted—a man with an expensive suit and a classy tie. His shirt collar glistened damply; he had spilled his drink.

"Stay calm!" someone shouted from the counter; then, as many guests were rushing towards the exit, "and remember to pay for your food before you..." Their last words were drowned out by the noise and the general buzz of commotion.

The waiter who had taken Allan and Iga's order a few minutes before made his way through the crowd to block the exit. But the throng simply pushed him aside.

"Why are they all running?" asked Iga, who seemed perfectly calm. She and Allan were among the few who had not jumped to their feet.

“The first ones…probably out of fear because they don’t know how to deal with this revelation. Their entire world view just collapsed in seconds. The rest because of the herd instinct or maybe just blind panic. Who knows? And certainly some are following strictly to avoid having to pay the bill.”

He laughed quietly, although he didn’t feel like doing so. The reactions of these people alienated him. There was no reason for the behavior they were displaying.

“Do you really think somebody would think of that, of all things?”

“I don’t understand it either. As if there was nothing more important.”

“Allan?” He looked at Iga and she continued, “We should get out of here. I have room in my truck, as you know. Tomorrow morning we’re leaving for New Orleans.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. The universe, the aliens—that’s not for me.”

“Iga…”

“No, no! Don’t say anything. Let’s just go, Allan. I don’t want to think about the dead anymore; the world-weary ones who jumped in front of and onto my truck. The memory is…” She didn’t continue.

Someone leaned over from the neighboring table. A young man, almost completely clean-shaven but for some diagonal strands of hair across the back of his hand, surrounded by tattoos.

“I’ve been listening to you. And let me tell you one thing—I’m not afraid either. I think it’s terrific.”

“Terrific?”

“Aliens! Man, that’s…that’s just terrific!”

Mercant winked. “You’re right.”

Iga took his hand and pulled him away. Outside in the parking lot, a crowd was gathering, far more than just the restaurant visitors. They flooded in from all directions, attracted by the mob like moths to the flame.

“Do you see that?” Mercant asked. Iga, still holding his hand, looked at him questioningly. “No fear. No panic. These people are calm, and even more so, curious about what’s coming.”

“Maybe so,” she replied, strangely distant and uninvolved. “I owe you an apology. You were right from the start.” She withdrew her hand from his, adjusting the strap of the overalls on her

shoulder. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

“But I do.”

With her next words, she proved ultimately that, by now, she understood him completely. “You’ll try to get to this Perry Rhodan and the alien.”

He nodded, amazed by how easily she saw through him. Evidently, she felt this closeness between them as well.

“I will. But not until we’ve climbed into your truck and reached New Orleans.”

Her gaze searched his, and it seemed hopeful. “Tomorrow morning?”

He felt a painful twinge because he didn’t want to lose any more time. But he owed Iga a lot, and the thought that she might not go with him hurt.

“Tomorrow morning, Wonderbra,” he confirmed.

Later, he had a dream, and the recent events intermingled to form bizarre images.

Again, he rushed to the giga truck with Iga; again she opened it by voice command, but this time the acoustic system did not recognize her voice. No wonder, because when she turned around, she was no longer Iga Tulodziecki, the trucker, but an alien creature with pale skin, red eyes, and long white hair. She was still wearing her overalls, though.

Even in his sleep, he knew that he was dreaming and that the figure of the Arkonide Crest was probably appearing in many people’s minds in some form or another. Somehow, the subconscious had to process the inconceivable.

“Where do you come from?” he asked, and the creature responded, “I am your destiny.”

“Where is Perry Rhodan?” he asked next, and Iga said, “I would rather hear my own name from you when you wake up.”

Confused, Mercant looked around, struggling to keep his eyes open. He was lying in the narrow sleeping cabin of the truck, and Wonderbra sat naked in front of him. She leaned back against the wall, legs folded. Her feet were touching his.

“Wh-What?”

“You woke up mumbling that astronaut’s name to yourself... If we were in a relationship, Allan, I’d have every reason to be jealous right now.” She scratched some old lube oil out from under her thumbnail. “Fortunately, we are only distant acquaintances.”

“I was dreaming.” He asked himself what those words were supposed to mean. An apology? A justification? Maybe not at all what Iga really wanted to hear in this situation?

“I know. Come on, let’s hit the road for New Orleans.”

“How much farther is it?”

“Last night we had thirty miles to go when we stopped at that abandoned parking lot.” She pulled up the left corner of her mouth. “So it’ll probably still be the same distance.”

“Iga, I’m not the type for this, but I’m having a hard time saying goodbye to you.”

She slipped into her clothes. “I’ll take you into town.”

“I just need a couple of hours there. Come with me afterwards.”

“Where?” she asked. “To China? To the desert?”

On the way, they had learned from the news crawl on the windshield that that was where the *Stardust* had landed. Since then, all contact seemed to have been lost, although that could have changed already. Mercant wondered how he had been able to sleep at all.

He got dressed and climbed into the front with Iga. This time, it was he who turned on the news crawl. It took less than a minute for him to find what he was interested in.

The *Stardust* was still in the Gobi, near a salt lake. A defensive shield stretched across it, the astronauts and the alien within. All around, Chinese troops were gathering. Nothing more was known.

“Have you considered it?” he asked his companion.

“I can’t go with you. The truck, my job...”

“I have a deposit box in New Orleans. There’s enough money there to take you along.”

She started the engine. “All that’s not for me.”

He wanted to try again but kept quiet. They set off, turning onto the road. There was a surprising amount of traffic, particularly in the direction of the city.

They were silent for a while, then Allan said, “I understand you, although I regret it.”

“I love being free and unbound too much. But if it comforts you, I had to think about it for a moment. Still, all that fuss about aliens and politics... I’m just tired of it.”

He had no choice but to accept her decision. Not twenty minutes later, they reached the New Orleans city limits.

“Let me out,” Mercant said. “If Homeland Security’s discovered

the trace leading to that deposit box, it's better if you're not around anymore. Otherwise you'll get roped into this."

She stopped at the side of the road and turned towards him. "Goodbyes aren't my thing, Allan. You know, no time for romance and all that."

She kissed him.

He kissed her, then stepped out of the truck and didn't look back.

The music at Jack's was as loud as it was bad. Just as it had been for the past seventy years, if the stories were to be believed. Maybe that was the secret for its success, as almost no other places in the city had been able to survive for so long through all the destructive hurricanes.

Mercant, however, thought it more probable that it was the mixture of slick criminals, silk panties, and bare facts that the area always guaranteed its customers. Rumor had it that some kings of the underworld swore by Jack's and protected it.

The establishment was on the third basement floor of an ugly apartment block on the city outskirts, and it smelled of sex and cigarettes—one of the last havens for smokers in public. Mercant had decided years ago to take advantage of that and to use Jack's—a name more noncommittal than almost any other—as a safe first port of call for his emergency plan.

Just like any guest, he was intercepted before he reached the counter. Two breasts and a hand were thrust out towards him. Demonstrating politeness, he grasped the latter.

"Your desires?" a smoky voice asked.

"Nothing from you," he replied and thought of Iga. "I have to go to the counter."

"I can accompany you, whether with or without…"

Mercant abandoned the stranger whose face he already could no longer remember. At the counter, he sat on one of the high stools so that his short stature didn't attract so much attention. When a waitress teetered towards him—a woman, of course, and more or less naked despite the leather straps on her skin—he didn't waste time on trivialities.

"Twelve, thirty-one, sixty-five," he said.

The barmaid rubbed the bridge of her nose as if she needed to adjust a pair of glasses. She probably wore contacts to work, but the

gesture had become second nature to her.

"You deposited something?" He nodded. "Wait a moment." She reached under the counter, there was a short gurgling noise, then she shoved him a schnapps and turned around.

Supposedly, depositing something at Jack's was as safe as it got. It was expensive enough, after all, and somehow Mercant had always found it interesting to resort to this dubious method. He, of all people. On the other hand, it fit the overall situation as well. He had always known that one day he would part ways with Homeland Security.

While waiting, he eavesdropped on the conversations around him. Even here, people were talking not about innuendo, money, or alcohol, but about the *Stardust* landing and the alien it contained. One guest doubted Crest's existence and spoke of a big propaganda lie, without explaining what it was supposedly about.

Before a minute had passed, a man sat down next to Mercant. Unlike his female colleagues, he was dressed, wearing a printed Hawaiian muscle shirt and very tight leather pants.

"You deposited something?"

"Twelve, thirty-one, sixty-five." Mercant repeated the code that he had personally chosen years ago.

The man nodded. "Come along. I suppose you brought the second installment in cash?"

Without a word, Mercant handed him a bundle of bills. It was about all he had left from Lesly Pounder's generous support during the rescue mission.

The money disappeared without the man counting it. "It's a rather old code, if I'm not mistaken."

"I'm only here to pick up the stuff," he replied, "not to engage in conversation."

The other grinned. "That's fine with me. As a house favor, feel free to take one of the girls for two hours..."

"No, thanks. Just my stuff."

Ten minutes later, Allan Mercant left Jack's with an absurdly small package. While in the elevator heading up to the first floor, he ripped it open and hastily fished out two inconspicuous keys from among the worthless paperbacks. He carelessly dropped the books and the wrapping into a trash can on the street, and with the keys in his hand got into a cab, instructing the driver to take him to the bank branch where another deposit box was waiting for him.

And in that second box was a new life where no one could track him down.

Splinter of Development (12)

Farewell letter from Monica Ailando, eleven years old. Written one day after the landing of the *Stardust* after the suicide wave had ebbed.

Addressed to her friend Andrea Black, without stamp.

Andrea,

Mom and Dad killed themselves.

Aunt R. may say they had a horrible accident, but that's a lie. I know it. I'm not stupid, after all. I hate Aunt R.

It's sad that they're dead, but I can survive that. What's way worse is that they didn't even think of me.

Why didn't they think of me? What am I supposed to do now? Live with R.?

Then better be dead. Without Mom. Without Dad. Without them thinking about me even once. I am worth nothing anyway.

Don't be sad. BW4U, Monica.

The girl cut her wrists with a razor blade. Her aunt found the child and brought her to the hospital where the doctors stopped the bleeding. Need for further procedures still unclear.

13.

June 28, 2036,
The day after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

Perry Rhodan grabbed Clark Flipper by the arm and pulled him along, away from the shield, away from General Bai Jun.

Mr. Rhodan! I am waiting! He still believed he could hear the general's voice. *I am waiting.* That got to him more than any open threat.

I am waiting.
For my victory.
For you to give up.
For you to lose your nerve.
For the moment when you all break inside.

Reginald Bull walked beside them. Rhodan could hear his friend's heavy breathing. Bull fumed with rage, and he'd only pulled himself together because he knew they couldn't give the general a spectacle. But as soon as they stood under the tent, hidden from public view, he punched his fist into his other open hand. There was a slap, and it was obvious that Bull would have much preferred a different target.

"Have you gone mad?" he growled, his face turning red. "I'd like to beat you black and blue!"

"Reg, I..."

"Do you have the slightest idea what the Chinese army will do if they get a hold of us? Do you?"

Clark Flipper avoided their stares. He lifted his arms. His fingers trembled. From the short fight at the collapsing defensive shield, a thin line of blood ran from his nose.

Rhodan stood in front of him. "Leave him, Reg. He's finished. He just lost his nerve." *As we all soon may.* General Bai Jun was waiting for it to happen.

"Simple, is it?" Bull snapped. "If you ask me, it's not all that simple, and it certainly doesn't stop here. There's no excuse! He very nearly killed us all!"

Rhodan couldn't disagree with that, and yet he had to prevent the quarrel at all costs. If they were fighting each other, only one person would benefit: Bai Jun.

"Reg, please go. Take care of Crest's formchair. We'll talk later."

"Is that an order, Mr. Rhodan?"

"A demand. Be reasonable."

The corners of Bull's mouth twitched, then he turned and entered the spacecraft.

"Thank you!" Flipper said.

Rhodan breathed heavily. "Reg is right; you know that." His colleague nodded. "I understand that your concern for Beth is almost killing you and that everything here is too much for you."

This time, Flipper didn't object.

"Now, listen to me carefully, because I'm only going to say it once. You can leave at any time, Clark, because this is not a prison." He pointed towards the spot on his uniform where he had ripped off the symbol of the American flag. "I've denied my allegiance to the United States, and you can do the same. You don't owe me or NASA anything either. If you want to go, go. Crest will activate a structural gap for you."

"I should have talked to you. I didn't...think."

"No, you didn't. But because we acted fast enough, we were able to prevent a disaster."

"For now," said Flipper gloomily.

I am waiting, Rhodan thought.

"But we don't have a future anymore, Perry, can't you see that?"

"You're wrong."

Flipper pressed both hands against his head, massaging his temples with his thumbs. "I don't think so. Out there, superior forces are waiting. A thousand soldiers? Ten thousand? With helicopters, space fighters and enough explosives to probably bomb the entire world to pieces!"

"That's exactly why it would be madness to go. But you're free to do so, Clark. If you do, you won't make it a hundred meters before the general either has you shot or captured. The alternative is to wait a few more hours."

Flipper put his hands down. "A few hours? And then what? What's going to change in that time?"

"Give me thirty minutes, then we'll talk about it. Only thirty

minutes, Clark."

"I can't imagine what you could possibly change in that time, but all right."

Rhodan nodded...and hoped.

Thora's skin was so pale that her red eyes seemed to glow.

"Rhodan," she said.

There was more condescension in that one word than Rhodan could ever summon in his life.

"Thora da Zoltral," he replied. "I am pleased to be able to speak with you."

Her holographic image smiled coolly. "Crest asked me to do this."

The old Arkonide had installed a hypercom connection to the *Aetron*, which was still on the dark side of the Moon, and had spoken briefly with Thora before Rhodan joined them. Crest had then fulfilled his request.

"I presume you're following the events on Earth."

"I am. Autonomous drones transmit everything to me." She leaned closer to the camera. "And you're lucky that I'm meek enough not to shoot you single-handedly!" Her voice trembled with suppressed rage.

Meekness, thought Rhodan. That wasn't exactly the trait he would attribute to the Arkonide commander.

"Thank you." He didn't know if she took it as mockery; he'd rather have to try to conduct the conversation on a matter-of-fact, functional level.

"The people of your planet aren't worth my attention, as has been proven once again. Unfortunately, Crest is still mistaken in this regard. Most unfortunate."

"What brings you to that opinion, Thora?"

She audibly ground her teeth before opening her full lips. "No space traveler of any..." she smiled, "*intelligent* people can act as irresponsibly as Clark Flipper. He could have killed himself and his entire crew; and even worse, Crest would have died as well if your besiegers had reacted a little faster. Outrageous behavior for a space traveler. I'm not surprised you've only made it as far as your satellite and that the borders of our solar system will remain out of reach for you."

"My colleague has been under extreme pressure, just like all of

us. He's plagued by other personal—"

"I don't want to hear it," she interrupted. "I don't have time to waste. And the worst thing is not your subordinate's behavior. You yourself, Rhodan, have done something even more outrageous."

He fell silent, baffled. With his quick intervention, he had saved the situation. Even Thora could not reproach him for that. Then it dawned on him what she was getting at.

Her next words confirmed his suspicion. "You, Mr. Rhodan, should have made an example of Flipper. Such behavior in a tense military situation deserves death. An immediate execution should have been the only possible reaction."

"I'm surprised to hear that from such a progressive being as yourself," Rhodan replied. "You might consider my people barbaric or underdeveloped, but I would make the same choice again. Humanity demands that Clark Flipper not be killed for his momentary failure. Punished, maybe, if the situation were different; but we might still need him. He's recognized and regretted his mistake."

"Need him? A man who has proven that he can't be trusted?" Thora's eyes narrowed. She shifted her position a little, and a part of her surroundings became visible in the holographic image. She was apparently staying in the room where the rest of the crew was dozing away on their loungers under the luminous clouds, lost in their games.

"Mr. Flipper has proven his capabilities in countless situations. He has been on many space—"

"Enough of this blabber!" Thora shouted. "Crest told me you had an important reason to talk to me. Well, I am waiting."

Her last words hit Rhodan like a punch in the face. *I am waiting.* The exact same phrase that General Bai Jun had used. A strange coincidence. The situation and the context were entirely different, but in both cases, the sentence contained a muffled threat that was clear enough.

"Very well, then," he replied. "Instead of thinking about making a pointless example, we have to analyze the situation matter-of-factly. By doing that, we'll reach the ideal result."

"And that would be?" she asked sneeringly.

"We're facing our last stand. The defensive shield around the *Stardust* may be impenetrable to our enemies, but the Chinese army is far more numerous. By using the dome, we have delayed things,

but nothing is won. We are captives, whether we like it or not. With his failed escape attempt, Clark Flipper has proven exactly that."

"So you see something good in his failure?"

"I don't want to say that, but it was an eye-opener. If nothing happens, we will perish. That may not matter to you, but it means something else: Crest's death. His decay is progressing; he's come into contact with our air and therefore may have been infected with another disease or a virus. Our doctor has examined him again. He's doomed to die if nothing changes!"

For the first time, Thora lost her arrogant self-assurance. "You said you could save him! He trusted you." She sounded vulnerable as she spoke.

Rhodan realized again how important Crest was to her. To save him, she would do anything. And that was exactly what his plan hinged on. He chose his next words with purpose—carefully yet urgently, and forcefully enough to make his position totally clear.

"We can still save Crest's life. But not on our own. We need help from other people. To manage that, we need your support, Thora. You have to send us more equipment."

"I don't need to do anything!" she shouted, suddenly the angry, powerful commander again.

"Think about it," Rhodan demanded. "Crest's life is at stake. We —no, *I* personally owe him a lot. If I have to, I'll give my life to save his. Help me, Thora. Help me save him!"

She remained silent. It was only for a few seconds, yet it felt like an eternity.

"All right. What do you want?" she asked reluctantly.

Rhodan began to reel off a lengthy list.

Splinter of Development (13)

New Orleans Daily News, special edition just hours after the *Stardust* landed in the Gobi Desert. Report on page four according to the latest news and the blurred, large-pixel images of the American space capsule.

"...the suicide wave does not seem to be subsiding. So far, 649 cases of mostly collective suicides have been reported, but the number of unreported cases is undoubtedly much higher."

That was yesterday's news, but the situation has now changed. Since the short message from our astronaut Perry Rhodan from the *Stardust* during their approach to Earth, in which he also presented the alien Crest da Zoltral, this phenomenon seems to have come to an end after all. The suicide wave is running its course. No new reports are coming in.

The mayor of New Orleans expressed great relief about this, especially after the deaths of thirty-eight cult members on the city limits, which still causes bewilderment and horror among the population. The bombing resulted in the deaths of eleven random passersby and left more than a hundred people injured, some of them seriously, although none are in a critical condition anymore, according to a press report from the hospitals.

What does this mean? What caused humanity to give in to a sort of "apocalyptic mood"? And what other consequences will this entail? Perhaps the next generation will have to judge this phenomenon and its development, because we are too close to it right now.

There is great uncertainty everywhere, and all media and news portals on the Internet are overflowing with sensational reports of other UFO sightings. NASA contradicts these to the utmost and calls upon the population to let reason reign in order to avoid a panic. There are neither spaceships in Earth's orbit nor have there been any attacks.

14.

June 28, 2036,
The day after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

The armchair's automatic massage function felt like a real hand grip. General Bai Jun cranked up the intensity and thought things over.

Had he made a mistake? Should he have ordered a concentrated bombing during the seconds the shield had been inactive as He Jian-Dong had suggested? As much as he continuously reprimanded his adjutant, he ultimately appreciated his opinions. He had not given him such a distinguished position for nothing.

Routine reports on the progress of the tunnels arrived at regular intervals. He Jian-Dong evaluated them and informed Bai Jun only when something extraordinary happened.

After a few minutes of silence and concentration, the general got up and left the tent. It was time to visit the troops in person. He had once been a part of such units himself. When he was directly on the ground, he could feel and absorb the emotions of the common soldier. He had to know what the mood was among them and if there was any danger that they might not function as they should in the event of an emergency.

The example of the astronaut Clark Flipper on the other side showed more than clearly the fatal consequences that could result from the failure of a single person. But while Rhodan only had to keep a small group under control, he, Bai Jun, had thousands under his command.

Several helicopters circled over the military camp and the energy dome; but this time they were following his direct orders, constantly relaying images to his adjutant's main computer in a room next to the command tent. As soon as an astronaut stepped out from under the tent, his every movement could be precisely tracked.

Otherwise, the group inside remained invisible as the defensive

shield prevented any recordings on a thermal or infrared basis. The patrol flights would only provide standard optical data. Still, everything that took place there would be of use to the general for further analysis.

A flicker on the horizon, high up in the air, caught his attention; a light reflection as if from an airplane, only noticeably bigger and brighter.

The general tried to make out more. The effect grew into a clearly visible, shining spot that seemed only as big as his thumbnail from that distance. Bai Jun would probably not even have noticed it if it had not reflected the morning sunlight, causing a flash. It was approaching at a blazing speed, rapidly growing in size. Without a doubt, it was a UFO.

He Jian-Dong suddenly appeared next to him. “Radar observation says it came from space!” he announced without any further explanation. Naturally, there could be only one topic at the moment.

So, it was indeed a flying object of the alien people. “Size?”

“We don’t know yet, exactly. Between fifty and one hundred meters in diameter. It is moving too fast for us to take precise measurements.”

The thing sped closer, a UFO like those that had been speculated about for decades and allegedly sighted regularly. Only this time it was real and not a product of an effervescent imagination or hoax. This was definitely an Arkonide ship, probably launched from the Moon. However, it had the shape of a sphere while the alleged sightings always spoke of a disk.

“We’ll wait!” the general ordered. He couldn’t rush anything. They had to observe and analyze the situation soberly.

Just then, the first shot thundered from a nearby artillery piece. A miniature missile flew up into the sky, leaving a billowing trail behind it, and exploded a distance from the approaching spaceship. A fireball flared into the air and puffed out into black clouds. The bang resounded like thunder over the desert.

Bai Jun swore inwardly. Not again! He could not lose control over his troops. He pulled out a radio set.

“Cease fire! Anyone who shoots will be executed by me!”

His adjutant was already pulling out a portable mini computer from the pocket of his uniform jacket and had started typing. His fingers darted across the touch screen fields.

The Arkonide ship had almost arrived, a metal mountain in the sky, looming menacingly over them. More projectiles raced towards it, and entire salvos of small cannons exploded without even reaching a threatening proximity. Tiny flashes of light flickered from the Arkonide vessel every millisecond, detonating the aerial bombs early.

"I'll intercept the shooters' radio contact!"

The adjutant stretched out the hand in which he held the mini-computer. From the speaker, the words of a soldier sounded.

"I'm getting it! I'm getting it!" he shouted a couple of times in succession. He sounded wild, over-excited. His voice cracked like that of a teenage boy.

The wiretapping program decoded the speaker's name and displayed it on the screen: Wu Guo-An. In the army for a decade but still in low rank. Thirty years old, with a commitment to serve for ten more years.

Bai Jun would make sure that he was not granted another day. If the general still had the opportunity to take care of anything

He latched onto the radio frequency. "Cease fire now! This is General Bai Jun speaking, and I order you to withdraw immediately!"

Wu Guo-An didn't react. Instead, the voice of a second man—Chen Ming, age thirty-four, as the display showed—was heard.

"I'll help you!"

A moment later, a strategic air force missile whistled into the air and blasted towards the Arkonide ship.

Madness. It was madness.

Bai Jun gave more orders, this time to the sub-army commander of the two soldiers. He instructed him to stop the shooters immediately, with targeted shots if necessary. But it was too late. What the general had feared and secretly expected seconds earlier suddenly happened.

The Arkonides in the ship opened fire in response, and that could only end in disaster.

Darting flashes of light streaked through the sky. The first to be hit was one of the patrol helicopters. It detonated in a sea of flames as it sank down over the landing site; the pilot had reacted quick-wittedly and tried to turn around. Blazing fires tumbled from a blackened center. Smoke streamed out on all sides. Pieces of rubble careened down and smashed into the midst of their ranks. Bai Jun

was close enough to see a sharp-edged metal piece with a diameter of several meters crash into the camp.

Screams rang out. More shots, this time from many places around their base, did nothing to damage the alien craft. Of course not. It doubtlessly had a defensive shield as effective as that protecting the *Stardust*.

The Arkonide ship responded with a salvo of destruction. Explosions flared up all around them. Flames shot into the sky. A jeep raced out of the camp, burning, heading in the direction of the dome. Well before it reached its target, it veered to the side, tilted, and was launched off the ground by a detonation. It slammed down and flipped over.

Bai Jun forcibly tore his gaze from the scene. He had to reassess the situation. They couldn't defend themselves against the Arkonide vessel, so he set himself another goal. He had to protect his troops as much as possible and, above all, prevent further panic.

"Cease fire!" he ordered again, this time on an emergency frequency that all the soldiers received. "No resistance!"

Maybe passivity would give them a chance to survive in the face of this superior enemy. If they were to lead an attack, it had to be concentrated and with a clear strategy, not unfocused and without a plan.

The spaceship was now floating directly above the camp, so low that its sixty-meter diameter obscured a good part of the sky. And it was still shooting. Flashes of light dashed into the gathered soldiers. Sand and rock flew all around them. People ran off, blindly fleeing the chaos.

One soldier raised a machine gun and aimed it at the vessel—a ridiculous action. But apparently, the man could not think clearly. He shot, so close that Bai Jun saw him tremble from the kickback. It happened in a ghostly soundlessness as more explosions detonated everywhere, drowning out everything else.

Almost casually, the general drew his own weapon and fired a bullet into the panicking soldier's head. Then he went about preventing the panic from spreading with clear and rational orders.

Even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Eventually, it ended.

Not because the Chinese army had succeeded in placing the alien spacecraft in distress or even damaging it. Likely the only reason was that the crew of the sixty-meter spacecraft had decided

to stop the attack.

Bai Jun looked down at the battlefield from the hill of his command post. Tents were in flames, the wrecks of helicopters, fighter aircraft, and tanks burning around them. In the center of the camp, a crater with a diameter of at least twenty meters and a depth of ten meters gaped. People were crawling within it like ants. Countless soldiers with minor injuries dragged the seriously injured to medical stations. They didn't yet pay any attention to the numerous dead; the time for that would come, but there were more important things to do first.

Rescue teams hurried through the chaos with fire extinguishers. There was fire nearly everywhere. Not far away from the command tent lay a corpse, still smoldering.

It slowly grew more quiet apart from the crackle of the flames and scattered screams.

"What about the ship?" Bai Jun asked.

He Jian-Dong seemed dithery; the general had never seen his adjutant so anxious. Time and again, the man's hand scurried to the receiver in his ear, as if unconsciously. "It landed." His gaze went into the void; he was apparently listening to news from the internet or the Army's internal com. "Inside the energy dome. A gap briefly opened up in the shield there."

Rhodan.

Bai Jun had known. This had all come from Perry Rhodan. The American astronaut had called for reinforcements from his Arkonide allies.

That thought automatically crossed the general's mind. Only afterwards did he realize that the circumstances could have been very different. However, the arrival of the alien spaceship explained why Rhodan had radiated such cool confidence in spite of his desperate situation. He had always had the knowledge of this option in the back of his mind.

For Bai Jun, in any case, it changed everything. He had to consider how to go on, reevaluate, and assess the situation. The Arkonides' demonstration of power had been blatant.

"New estimates," He Jian-Dong announced. "The number of dead is at least nine hundred. More than two thousand injured. No concrete overview yet."

Two figures approached. One of them was Xu Bao-Jia, whom the general knew personally—one of his best sub-army

commanders, whose career he'd been following for years.

Bao-Jia was dragging along a young man who was bleeding from a cut on his forehead. One eye was caked in dark red, the upper part of his uniform torn. The general hadn't known this second soldier until recently; now, his name had been indelibly branded into his mind: Wu Guo-An.

The name meant "safe land." The man's thoughtless firing on the Arkonide spaceship had, however, led to the exact opposite of what that name promised. The alien ship likely wouldn't have launched its attack had it not been provoked. The fact that it had now withdrawn under the dome supported this suspicion.

Would and had, the general thought. He didn't know; he could only guess. He hated such thought experiments based on unfounded speculations that weren't built on verifiable facts. But one thing was certain.

"Wu Guo-An," he said, "you disobeyed a direct order and opened fire on the alien unit contrary to instructions."

The soldier trembled. His pupils widened. "I... I panicked. I was scared and wanted to—"

"Pull yourself together!" sub-army officer Xu Bao-Jia, the young man's direct superior, demanded. "Give a clear report!"

Wu Guo-An cringed as if weathering a physical blow and tried to spring to attention. The corners of his mouth trembled.

"Don't kill me," he whispered, so softly that Bai Jun barely heard it.

And maybe that would have been better. The piteousness of this soldier disgusted him. Wu Guo-An was probably aware of what he had done and of the consequences of his ridiculous attack. As this thought occurred to him, the general decided not to execute him after all. Letting him live constituted a much harsher punishment and would perhaps make a good soldier out of this fool in the end.

"Wu Guo-An, you'll be demoted to the lowest rank and will continue to serve in the army. Your superior, Xu Bao-Jia, will see to it that you personally pick up the dismembered bodies from this assault. Now get out of my face."

Without further comment, he turned away and disappeared into the command tent.

Splinter of Development (14)

From a flyer, distributed to about ten thousand mailboxes in the city of Berlin on June 28, 2036:

Are you also worried about the reports from space?

Do you not know what to do?

You're not alone. Many people have contacted us since the astonishing and frightening images have been irresponsibly distributed by the media.

Don't be afraid! Trust our long-term experience in unusual situations.

Call us, at affordable prices. We are there for you, and we understand you.

15.

Eight hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

The artificial hair was in place, and the contact lenses changed the color of his eyes. Due to a razor-thin plastic cap, nobody would even recognize his fingerprints as those of Allan D. Mercant.

He had prepared this equipment in the bank's safe deposit years ago. A new ID, safe credit card details, a flawless patient history, including a social security number, a large amount of cash—in fact, he was now Frank Turrington, the man who squinted out from the passport photo, as if he hadn't felt well at the time it was taken.

During his younger years, Mr. Turrington had been a dockworker or a supermarket clerk, depending on the season, and dabbled unsuccessfully at writing, without ever being able to get his work published by a publishing house. ("May I send you a sample?")

Eventually, he had given up on writing but had never really let go as he embarked on a career as a businessman, an endeavor through which he had managed to make money thanks to some risky investments. On some weekends, he would dedicate many hours to his stories, which nobody else ever got to see.

At the age of twenty-two, he had been engaged for three whole months before the breakup had been announced by the future bride. Afterwards, he'd had several amorous adventures during his younger years, but his luck with women had failed him by his thirties. His general school education could be called average at best, as could his taste in restaurants. He liked old movies from the last century and otherwise adapted to the mainstream.

Mercant could recite a polished resume down to the very last detail. He knew when Turrington's appendix had been removed. He still knew the address of the flat he'd had after moving out of his parents' place. He could describe the location where he had deflowered his first teenager, Mandy Gerling, who had later died of a drug overdose.

After leaving the bank, Mr. Frank Turrington made his way to an Internet terminal at one of the large subway stations—an ideal place to remain unobserved. A host of people passed this site day after day, hour after hour.

He was meticulous about not turning his face towards the surveillance camera for even a moment. All a potential pursuer would be able to see on the digital storage medium would be the back of a trench coat and a pulled-down hat.

Convinced that he wouldn't be able to learn anything he didn't already know from the Web about the situation in the Gobi, he didn't even bother searching for information. Instead, he logged on to the New Orleans airport booking network, looking for the fastest possible flight to China with a destination as close to the Gobi as possible. Cost didn't matter; the envelope of cash in his pocket was big enough to pay even the exorbitant first-class fares. Besides, for a fast online booking, his credit card account showed a sufficient balance. Ever since Frank Turrington had opened it years ago, small transactions had been made, corresponding fully with the discreet and everyday wishes of the otherwise unassuming mid-level businessman. Subscriptions, purchases from online movie distributors, hotel stays... Everything at perfectly irregular yet automated intervals.

But even the best preparations didn't change anything about his current situation. All flights showed as being fully booked, if they hadn't been canceled outright by the airlines. Mercant searched for available spots and offers by travel agencies. The results disillusioned him. There was simply no way to get to China. What was going on there? Was the Chinese government cutting itself off? That was an obvious theory, although he had to dismiss it after further research. Not only were flights to China fully booked, all international air traffic was completely overrun.

In the service chats with the providers, he kept getting the same canned responses: *"We are sorry, sir, but we can't make an exception in your case either."* That didn't help him at all.

Allan Mercant, alias Frank Turrington, cut off the connection and walked away from the public terminal. He would look around the airport more closely. In his experience, everything was possible if you only paid enough money.

As he went up the escalator, he had the impression that someone was watching him. He felt a shudder run through his body

but didn't let on that anything was amiss. He carefully observed his surroundings, taking mind to keep a low profile. He couldn't detect anything conspicuous in the crowd to justify his feeling; however, the environment offered a potential pursuer countless places to hide.

Mercant decided to remain cautious but told himself that he was probably suffering from a persecution complex. He was sure that nobody had followed him to the bank or discovered the identity he had been using as it was known only to him. Not even Lesly Pounder was aware of it.

On the street, he didn't have to look for long before he found a vacant taxi. He dropped into the back seat.

"To the airport."

"That will take a while," mumbled the driver, who obviously had difficulty opening his mouth wide enough to utter clear words.

Allan remembered the roadblocks that he and Iga had repeatedly encountered along the way. Were the access roads to the airport being controlled? Here in the city center he hadn't noticed any increased police activity.

"What's going on?"

"Jammed streets. Everybody wants to go home since people are only talking about the aliens."

Mercant leaned back, fastened his seat belt. "Same here," he lied.

"I don't have a family," the driver explained, evidently in a talkative mood. "Never found time for it because I always have to be on my way to keep not only the wheels but also the coins rolling." He laughed as if he had just told an especially good joke.

"I hear it's difficult to find available flights right now."

"Seems so. I don't understand why they all want to fly anyway. If these aliens show up, they're going to shoot the airplanes first, aren't they?"

At first, Mercant wanted to contradict him but then decided against it. A discussion on this level made no sense. So he remained silent and only replied to additional questions in monosyllables. Eventually, the driver stopped trying to communicate and resorted to playing the sounds of an excruciatingly kitschy singer, humming along as they drove. Allan took the opportunity to relax his mind and close his eyes. A little rest couldn't hurt in light of what lay ahead.

He fell asleep immediately.

When the cab stopped, he woke up and was instantly fully aware.

"That was faster than I thought," the driver said before announcing an exorbitantly high sum as the fare.

Mercant peeked at the disabled taxi meter—a bad habit that had been spreading among free drivers in the big cities in recent years. Since he wasn't in the mood for a long discussion, he paid and shortly thereafter stepped into the hopelessly crowded Departure Lounge A.

Dozens of customers were waiting in front of each counter, and nobody looked particularly satisfied. Service staff were handing out drinks that rarely earned them a friendly glance but rather annoyed questions or cheeky demands.

Allan immediately realized that it made no sense to stand in line with thousands of people. He had the two things that were necessary in a situation like this: money and the knowledge of how to do business behind the scenes. As cool as a cucumber, he strolled up to the first-class check-in for one of the largest airlines, ignoring the sign that made it abundantly clear that passage was only permitted with a valid ticket.

A lady with a friendly smile greeted him with the words, "Your ID, Sir?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have a ticket," he said.

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to go to a different counter."

He slid a thousand-dollar bill onto the counter. "I have to go to China."

The smile stuck to her lips as if frozen, but her eyes weren't quite so friendly anymore. "Still, I'm not able to—"

"Yes, you are."

"Sir, I..."

Now he was smiling too. "I suppose that your salary leaves much to be desired, Mrs...." He glanced ostentatiously at the name tag over the neat curvature of her breast. "Wineberg." Another hundred-dollar bill was added to the counter. "If you'd please let me speak to your supervisor, that's all that I would ask of you. Apart from a dinner, maybe, but unfortunately, I won't be in town long enough."

She sat for a moment as if taken aback, then picked up the hundred-dollar bill. “If you’d like to wait for a moment, please.”

“But of course.”

When she got up, she leaned closer to him. He smelled her perfume; it was sweet yet slightly dry.

“You know, Mr. Turlington,”—he didn’t correct her—“you are free to speak to my supervisor at any time. You could have done that for one hundred dollars less.”

He simply smiled. A short while later, he had a ticket that had not only cost him a large chunk of money but also another hundred and fifty dollars that didn’t figure on any receipt. As chance would have it, the lady’s supervisor was also her husband, so the Winebergs had made a good deal that day.

Allan, too, was anything but unsatisfied, although the flight would only take him to Shanghai. That was still far away from the Gobi Desert, but it was better than nothing. Their insistence that a closer destination truly wasn’t possible had convinced him.

After leaving Mr. Wineberg’s office, he hurried to the check-in and through security. His forged passport was accepted without issue, as expected. The gate wasn’t open yet, and he was just grabbing a coffee from the vending machine when he came to an unpleasant conclusion: he was indeed being followed. With the trained eye of a long-time agent, he noticed the hidden weapon in the hand of a man walking resolutely towards him.

The last bit of coffee was just dripping from the machine into the shaky plastic cup as Allan dashed off.

He pushed a young woman aside, ignored her scream, grabbed her by the sleeve, and pulled her back again. He heard her fall to the ground behind him, thus blocking his pursuer’s way for at least for a couple of seconds.

People shouted in confusion and Mercant jumped over the handrail blocking the way to the neighboring gate and rushed on. Of course, an airport terminal, of all places, was the worst possible place for a spectacular escape. But those following him (he assumed there were at least two) had the same handicap. At least, if they wanted to act discreetly and not draw too much attention to themselves, as he suspected was the case. Homeland Security liked to work in secrecy.

Unless it was someone else chasing him. After all, he didn’t

know what sort of repercussions this situation might have had by now. Apparently, they had wanted to threaten him with a weapon and take him away quickly and quietly. Luckily, his opponents hadn't succeeded, which filled him with grim contentment. And now? They certainly wouldn't shoot and risk a panic in the overcrowded airport.

He darted on, past a series of stores offering leather goods and perfume. Beside him, behind a waist-high glass barrier, a moving walkway ran, but it was too crowded for him to use.

A bigger retail store offered a route to a parallel hallway. He rushed inside, ducking between two shelves. Only there did he allow himself a glance back. His pursuers were nowhere to be seen. Could he really have left them behind so easily? He couldn't imagine that being the case, but he accepted it for the time being.

Mercant recalled what he knew about the New Orleans airport. After a hurricane had destroyed it and cut it off from international air traffic for a full two years in 2023—or was it 2024?—it had undergone a complete reconstruction and was now considered one of the most modern airports in the country. Mercant had often used it as a stopover during his travels.

He thought feverishly, using his knowledge of the terminal to concoct an escape plan. When he saw two security officials in uniform several meters away, he moved farther into the store. The air smelled like sweets; a true paradise. The officers were probably looking for him to sort out the unfortunate incident with the woman. But since he hadn't caused her any real harm, he didn't have to worry that there would be many security guards on the job.

Belgian chocolates, Italian pastries, Arabic cocoa powder, Moroccan candied coffee beans, and Australian kelp sticks (Mercant had only heard about this new-fashioned specialty, but had never seen it before) surrounded him.

When a store assistant glanced in his direction, he randomly grabbed one of the bowls that offered tiny pieces of the precious sweets to taste. He ate one, smiled at the lady, and gave her a thumbs up like a little boy. She smiled awkwardly and turned away.

Mercant reached a stand offering shrink-wrapped cakes in all sizes. Across from that, savory delicacies were lined up, which he had only noticed in passing, like the other goods. He turned and looked for his pursuers. He didn't see the man with the gun, at least, although he had only been able to catch a glimpse of him

before. After some slight changes to his attire (a cap, a different jacket, glasses), the man likely wouldn't recognize him. But other enemies could be lurking anywhere. These weren't good conditions to be in. He desperately had to get out of there. His hard-won ticket to Shanghai was suddenly worthless.

Well, he thought crossly, *at least the Winebergs profited from all this.*

He started. The Winebergs. Could Homeland Security have known about his new identity after all? Had he not proceeded carefully and discreetly enough at the time? Had he practically turned himself in to his enemies when he'd bought a plane ticket because the booking system had passed the name on?

At this point, this was idle speculation that got him nowhere. Carefully looking in all directions, he left the store through the opposite exit next to an open cash desk and hurried through the *Nothing to Declare* exit into the public area.

This time he treated himself to the luxury of a moving walkway, which transported him directly to the airport shuttle. He hopped onto the train to Departure Lounge C. From there, he remembered there was a passageway to a large underground parking lot.

As his steps echoed off the bare concrete walls, he still didn't see any pursuers. In this place, it was much harder for them to hide from discovery, although the same was true in reverse. But he took the risk consciously. Slowly, always ready to defend himself, he snuck along the rows of parked cars to the next staffed information booth, small panels leading the way.

Nobody seemed to be around; even when he abruptly stopped and the sound of his footsteps died away, he didn't hear any noises nearby. Before long, he reached the ticket booth where a bored man nearly—or perhaps even past—retirement age looked up at his arrival.

"Yes?"

"I lost my parking ticket."

"That's not good."

An unbelievably intelligent answer. Mercant tried a shy smile and made a sufficient effort to look insecure.

"How do I get out of here with my car?"

The old guy rolled his eyes at the ignorance of his customer. No doubt he finally felt important again, and he adjusted the baseball

cap on his bald head. “How long have you been parking here?”

“Three days,” Alan claimed.

“Not good at all, mister. You understand, we can’t check that. You’ll have to pay the minimum fee for one month plus a fifty dollar fine, then I’ll deliver a new ticket to you.”

“Deliver” was probably the smartest word in this man’s vocabulary. He stressed it noticeably, as if unsure that the other could understand it.

“One month? Listen, I—”

“Nothing I can do about it, mister.” The attendant spread his arms and shrugged. “I don’t make the rules.”

Mercant could easily believe that. “Well then, it seems I don’t have a choice.”

“So, you’ll pay, right?”

“What else? I can’t just leave my car here.”

Again, his cash supply dwindled. Now in possession of an exit ticket, he distanced himself from the booth before cracking and jump-starting a car—a routine operation that took him less than two minutes.

Another three minutes later, he pulled into the running traffic around the airport, wondering how he’d now make it to China as quickly as possible. Could the use of his ID really have given him away? Or had Homeland Security been following him all along and had only wanted to find out what his final destination was?

Startled, he thought of Iga. What if she had fallen into the hands of the agents by now and they were currently interrogating her? That could end very badly for her. His heavy conscience plagued him, but he couldn’t do anything about it now except hope that he was wrong.

He left the city and stopped at the first truck stop on the empty road. During his time with Iga, he had gotten used to the routine. A few small cars were parked in the front along with four trucks and a single giga truck the size of the one that Wonderbra drove.

The toilets were in a tiny side building next to the restaurant. An unevenly paved path with a thousand stumbling blocks led there. Mercant opened the door to the men’s toilet, and the pungent stink of urine hit him. A dented and emptied condom dispenser hung warped on the tiled wall.

While he was washing his hands on the way out, the entrance door swung open, and two men entered. One of them pointed his

gun at Mercant's head, the other at his chest.

"This could have been easier for all of us."

With those words, a shot rang out, and Allan felt a sharp pain over his heart. He heard himself hit the ground, but apart from that didn't sense anything because his consciousness was already fading.

Splinter of Development (15)

From an article for distribution to the relevant media and the university network. Author: Prof. Dr. Hermann Langke, Chair for Social Competence and Viral Network Marketing.

According to the internal storage of his computer, last saved on the day after the *Stardust* landed at 3:35 p.m. Never sent by email; deleted at 5:53 p.m.:

A connection with the fact that, at that time, Prof. Langke learned about the death of his colleague George Townsend, who had seemingly met a far worse fate. The true reason was never made known.

After my release from imprisonment by Homeland Security, I was deported without compensation. At my persistent request for an explanation, I was finally offered the so-called standard compensation, which allows for an amount of 63.58 dollars per day while in custody for innocent detainees.

An agent explained to me with a smirk that in my case, as a gesture of goodwill, they were ready to pay for two full days, although on both June 27 and 28, only a few hours' worth of detainment had been incurred. So, despite my refusal, he handed me a check for 127.16 dollars.

This mockery exceeds what I can accept as a citizen of this country. If I'd been treated more kindly, I would have been willing to leave without comment and keep quiet given the urgency of the situation. But not this way.

Dear colleagues, dear students, this should and must become public. The appearance of extraterrestrial, intelligent life undoubtedly puts a non-negligible pressure on the state governments, but the general humanity and our communication with each other [...]"

16.

June 28, 2036,
The day after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

An auxiliary craft measuring sixty meters... Perry Rhodan felt tiny and insignificant as he approached this Arkonide marvel and looked up at it. But he couldn't enjoy the sight after what Thora had done in the last few minutes.

He couldn't even begin to grasp the curved spherical shape. The sunlight filtering through the shimmering energy shield shone on the metallic surface, creating sparkling reflections. The dome had expanded flexibly after the craft had landed.

In the steel body of the spherical ship, a lock opened. Thora stepped out and floated down. She was doubtlessly using an anti-grav beam, the effect of which the astronauts had already observed on the *Aetron*, which had landed on the Moon.

At Reginald's side, Rhodan rushed towards the Arkonide. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she walked off naturally. Her face remained expressionless; she radiated an aura of coolness and hubris. Every step made her look like an ancient Greek goddess of vengeance—flawless, but also imperious and arrogant. She didn't grant the two astronauts a glance but headed purposefully to the *Stardust*.

Bull stopped, thunderstruck. "This is too much, Perry," he squeezed out, shaking with anger. "At some point, enough is enough, and this Thora has gone too far!"

"Stay calm, Reg! We need..."

Rhodan couldn't finish. His friend started running and stood in the Arkonide's way. She stopped, wrinkling her nose. Her white hair fell smoothly and perfectly over her shoulders. She held her arms half in front of her body, unconsciously, as if to keep all other living beings away from her.

"What is it, human?"

"That was murder!" Bull shouted.

Rhodan had never seen his friend so angry, so on the edge of losing control. He stood next to Bull, but the other man didn't seem to notice him at all. His hands clenched into fists. He pressed his arms with apparent effort to his body. It seemed as if he had to forcibly stop himself from lashing out at her.

"Do you hear that? Murder! This had nothing, absolutely *nothing* to do with self-defense! Those soldiers had no chance, and you fired indiscriminately into the crowd..."

"Those people opened fire," Thora interrupted, without the slightest emotional involvement. "My reaction was indeed purely one of self-defense."

"Self-defense?" Now Bull did raise his fists. "For you, their attack was nothing more than a storm of insects! It was no danger to you!"

"Insects are an annoyance," Thora replied. "In this respect, it's a rather suitable comparison to your people, Mr. Bull. And now get out of my way. I am here to speak with Crest, and I certainly won't allow you to stop me from doing that. Afterwards, I can do business with your colleague. You, Mr. Bull, should leave now."

"You..." Bull began, but Rhodan pointedly grabbed him by the arm and drew him back.

"Besides, Mr. Bull, I recommend that you reflect for once. Stop making such a fuss! If I had wished it, none of these... How did you put it? None of these *insects* would still be alive."

Bull's muscles tensed.

"Leave her," Rhodan whispered.

Bull struggled against his grip to break free, and Rhodan had to use all his strength to hold him back.

"If you attack her, everything's lost! We need her." He tried to speak softly enough that Thora, who was already several meters away and had now stepped out of the shadow of her auxiliary craft, couldn't hear him.

"We can't cooperate with this mass murderer, Perry! Didn't you see what she did?"

"Reg, understand that we have to make the best of the situation, and that includes the need for access to Arkonide technology. I'd rather only have to negotiate with Crest, but the situation is different now, whether we like it or not."

Bull tore away, but at least he didn't run after the alien commander. He avoided Rhodan's eyes. "We'll see where it takes

us."

"We?" Rhodan repeated. "Can I count on you, Reg?"

His friend looked at him, nodded briefly, and turned away. "Go with her onto the *Stardust* and listen to what she has to say." He hurried to the edge of the tent canopy, leaned back against it, sat down on the ground, and started writing in the sand.

Rhodan stared after him briefly, wondering how they would all survive the next few hours, let alone days. With a last look at the auxiliary craft and the knowledge of what was inside, he entered the *Stardust*. He didn't know whether to feel hope or horror.

At the entrance to the pilot's room, Rhodan stopped. Crest sat on his recliner, half upright, half supported by cushions, Thora stood in front of him, her knees leaning on the pilot's seat in which he, Rhodan, had travelled to the Moon and back in.

He didn't hide, but neither did he disturb the conversation of the aliens which, to his surprise, was being held in English. The Arkonide signalled by way of a barely perceptible nod that he had noticed his arrival.

"Haven't you had enough examples of the barbarism of these humans?" Thora asked. "Come back with me, Crest!"

"I am staying." There was a sympathy and tenderness in his voice that surprised Rhodan. The old Arkonide loved Thora like a daughter, there was no doubt about it. Crest had told him that he had taken her into his household many years ago, when she had been an orphan and all by herself. She had thanked him with an unwavering affection and (there was no doubt about this either) a love as if for a father—a trait that almost made her human and was not at all reminiscent of the goddess of vengeance who had fired on the soldiers, sowing death and destruction.

"Are you sure you are not making a mistake?" Suddenly, there was something soft in Thora's features that accentuated her flawlessness. She seemed more vulnerable than ever. She would withstand a host of attackers but not the feelings she had for the old Arkonide.

"I see a potential in these humans that can lead them into the future. Their people are at odds with each other and disunited, but tell me, Thora, is it the first time you are witnessing such a thing?" He sounded nostalgic, as if speaking from decades of experience.

His companion quietly tightened her posture and slowly turned

around. “You’re watching us, Mr. Rhodan.” Her aura was now as cool as before. “I knew it from the moment Crest insisted on using your pathetic language. Well, let’s forget it. I brought what you asked me to. When you are ready, I will unload the auxiliary craft.”

Without waiting for his reply, Thora pulled a small device from a pocket of her suit, not unlike a pod. Some displays were lighting up, but Rhodan couldn’t get a closer look.

She entered a command. “Move outside, human. The unloading has begun. Robots will take care of everything. As soon as it’s done, I will retreat again. Crest has made the unfortunate decision to stay here.”

“I’m glad he made that decision,” Rhodan insisted. “It gives us a chance to fulfill our promise and do everything to heal him. You yourself, Thora, have laid one of the foundations for this by supplying everything I asked you for.”

The commander turned to the Arkonide. A tear ran from the corner of one eye. As Rhodan knew by now, it meant something different to her people than it did to humans. It expressed inner turmoil.

“We’ll meet again, Crest,” she said. Then she walked briskly past Rhodan and left the *Stardust* before he did.

In the auxiliary craft, additional bulkheads opened. Massive robots floated out, touching down hard on the earth. The units unfolded by swinging limbs out to the side until the overall picture roughly resembled humanoid beings, with a central body, legs, and arms.

These arms grabbed large containers and unloaded them from the *Aetron’s* auxiliary craft. With pounding steps, they moved the enormous boxes to the side and placed them next to the Earth ship, stacking some of them onto each other and the rest next to each other.

All of that took place outside of the protective tent canopy. Rhodan felt a certain satisfaction as he thought about the questions that were now tormenting General Bai Jun. He tried to put himself in his opponent’s position. Did Bai Jun believe in a huge arsenal of weapons? Possibly in strange combat robots? Those questions would be answered soon. For now, Rhodan had to make some preparations.

As the unloading came to an end, Clark Flipper appeared next

to the outermost container. He looked tiny next to it. The metal cuboid towered far above him, measuring at least five meters in length. Strange characters ran across the front.

Flipper looked up, placing a hand on the outer wall. The working robots returned to the auxiliary craft, folding back into their original shapes, and floated into the Arkonide ship via an anti-grav beam. Some seemed to possess a floating ability of their own as they took off well before the bulkhead.

When the Arkonide moved to return to the auxiliary craft, Rhodan intercepted her and bowed. “Thora da Zoltral.”

She didn’t move a muscle. “Do you want to harangue me like your colleague? Cry that I killed those oh-so-innocent soldiers who besieged you and Crest and fired upon you with lethal weapons?”

“No.”

His short and unequivocal answer seemed to surprise her. “But?”

“To make my feelings clear, Thora: I don’t condone your attack, but it was your decision, and you have to live with what you’ve done. Right now, I’d like to ask for your help one more time.”

“You don’t know when to stop, Mr. Rhodan. I have already exceeded every reasonable measure.” She turned her back on him and strode majestically towards her ship.

“You are mistaken, Thora!” he shouted after the Arkonide. “I’m asking you to launch another attack.”

She stopped. Turned around. Looked at him. And for the first time, he thought he recognized a certain respect in her expression.

“So?” she asked. “Continue speaking.”

He told her about his plan, and she immediately agreed.

The four men stood side by side and watched through the defensive shield as the auxiliary craft spanning sixty meters slowly rose into the sky. This time, the Chinese troops didn’t fire at it. Apparently, they had learned their lesson.

Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, Dr. Eric Manoli, and Clark Flipper all held their breaths as the first ray of light raced from the auxiliary craft to the Earth. This time, Thora didn’t fire into the crowd of enemy soldiers.

The first interfering transmitter that Bai Jun had set up to cut off all communication between the captured astronauts and the rest of the planet suddenly exploded. The Arkonide struck precisely, and

before the fireball from the detonation had collapsed, she fired again. Then a third time. That was enough. All interfering transmitters had been destroyed.

The auxiliary craft rose higher and shrank to a small dot in the distance, finally growing invisible to the naked eye. The flight to the Moon would probably only take the alien a few minutes. A shiver ran down Rhodan's spine as he again recognized the incredible possibilities of this technology. Could he himself one day travel in such a modern spacecraft, possibly even steer it as a pilot?

He shook off the thought. Another task awaited him now. "Everything is prepared," he announced to his colleagues. "The spectacle for the whole world can begin."

Splinter of Development (16)

Entry in Prof. Dr. Hermann Langke's bank statement of June 28, 2036, 5:31 p.m.:

+ 35,000 dollars.

17.

Eleven hours after the landing of the Stardust *in the Gobi Desert*

The first thing that Allan D. Mercant noticed was the simple truth that he was still alive, although he had been shot in the chest right next to his heart. The second thing was a constant noise.

He breathed deeply and tried to open his eyes. He succeeded, but everything remained dark around him; even more so, it was pitch-black, darker than a starless and moonless night.

Mercant wondered if he was wrong and if this was death after all—an existence without light or feeling. He couldn't sense his body any longer. It was as if it didn't exist anymore, and when he tried to move, there was nothing there.

He forced himself to think and analyzed his situation logically.

"Mr. Mercant," he heard a moment later, "you are awake."

Awake?

"I guess I owe you an explanation. I shot you with a tranquilizer dart containing an extremely fast and powerful paralyzing substance. You'll soon fully recover."

But the darkness? he asked himself without finding the strength to say it aloud.

"Furthermore, we had to blindfold you to prevent you from seeing where we were taking you," the other continued, as if reading his thoughts. "Your nerves probably aren't yet ready to feel the pressure of the blindfold. So don't worry."

That was all Mercant heard. Then he fell asleep again.

When he awoke for the second time, he felt strangely well. He was lying on a wide couch with a pillow under his head. His gaze wandered to the window, through which he could see the ocean. One of the panes was pushed up a little, and the sound of the waves drifted in. He remembered hearing it earlier during his first short waking phase as well.

He tried to move and succeeded without issue this time.

Carefully, he sat up. He felt dizzy at first, but it passed, just like the nausea that suddenly rushed through his body. He stood up, staggered to the windows, and pushed the half-raised one further open.

Fresh sea air brushed his face. Next to the window was a wing door, and Mercant stepped through it onto a spacious porch. The steady waves rushed over the sandy beach, and a ship crossed the distant horizon. With a strange inner calm, he enjoyed the view and the peace that the grandiose wideness conveyed to him.

"Are you thinking about escaping?" a voice beside him asked.

Strange, the thought hadn't even occurred to him. He still felt fine, not as if he had been kidnapped, but as if he had reached his destination. However, his destination was the Gobi Desert, not in this place. Not with whoever had just spoken to him, but with Perry Rhodan.

He turned to the side. An old man sat in a deck chair, half hidden by a low palm tree whose leaves hung low. He hadn't moved, so Mercant hadn't even noticed him. Now the man stood up. He was small, hunched, and had thin hair. His elegant designer suit had patches at the elbows and knees—an absurd sight. He had the appearance of an eccentric British lord while simultaneously looking like his own haggard servant.

The stranger stretched out his hand. "Mr. Mercant."

So, this was his true kidnapper, the one who had sent his lackeys to retrieve him. Merchant could have overpowered him easily, but the thought didn't even occur to him.

"My name is Adams." The old man smiled. The wrinkles in his skin deepened as he did. He handed the former agent a business card.

The latter took it and gave it a quick glance. "Homer Gershwin Adams," it read. Nothing more. No contact details.

"I see," said Adams contently, "you are familiar with this old custom. I am a fossil from the last century. That's how it is with people who have passed seventy."

Allan slid the business card into his pocket. "You already know my name."

"Since I know more about you than you know about me, I want to tell you something else, Mr. Mercant." The elderly man stepped over to the porch railing, which almost reached up to his neck. His hunched back made him look as if he were constantly bending over.

“Nobody knows, but I am the richest man in the world.”

Allan didn’t doubt those words for a second.

“Besides, I am aware of what you did, Mr. Mercant, and why you did it. I also know your future plans. I know more about you than even Lesly Pounder thought he did.”

“Then there’s probably no point in denying what I’ve done.”

“Why would you? You haven’t made any mistakes. Quite the contrary.”

Allan joined the stranger and leaned over the railing. The view stretched far, all the way up to the beach. Only a narrow strip of sand was dry there, the mighty waves nearly reaching the house.

“Why did you have me kidnapped, then?”

“To protect you from making a big mistake.”

“Which would be?”

“It’s pointless to go to China. Even if you succeed in reaching the Gobi, which seems more than unlikely given the current situation, even for a man of your capabilities, nothing would be achieved by it. The landing site of the *Stardust* is completely sealed off by the military and additionally secured by an energy dome of an unknown nature. You can’t help Perry Rhodan that way, as commendable as your attempt might be.”

Mercant felt completely bare to this stranger, down to the roots of his soul. And he trusted him, although so far, there wasn’t much of a reason for that. “How else can I...can *we* support him?”

The old man went back to the deck chair. He didn’t sit down but instead took two glasses from the small side table next to it, passing one to his guest.

“Lime juice. A simple but very refreshing drink. After the regrettable anesthesia, which unfortunately couldn’t be avoided, you must be thirsty.”

Merchant took it and drank. It did him good and revived him. Only then did he realize how dry his mouth and throat had been.

“But back to the important matters,” Homer G. Adams continued. “You asked a very good question. How can we help Perry Rhodan? It’s quite simple, Mr. Mercant: with our unique abilities.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Let me tell you a little story. As I said, I am the richest man in the world. But that wasn’t always the case. During my youth, I played soccer.” He laughed softly. “It might sound unbelievable,

when you look at me today. A severe injury ended my career as a professional athlete abruptly and irrevocably. Eventually, I discovered my special talent and made a lot of money very quickly."

"Your...talent?"

"Do you know what a mutant is, Mr. Mercant?"

Allan gasped, wanting to reply, but the old man waved him off.

"No, no, I am rushing ahead. Let me finish the story first. I founded my own soccer club with the money I made. Everything seemed to work out for me, because in an almost frightening way, I knew beforehand what was going to happen next. Premonitions, which perfectly complemented my photographic memory. What I see once, I never forget again. Never again, do you understand? Every detail. In the nineties of the last century, I made a mistake, though. I lost everything, went to jail, and returned to freedom as a nobody." He raised his hands. "Well, what can I say? I started all over again. I can't even estimate my current fortune, nor do I care about the exact amount."

"What are you getting at?"

"That I'm a mutant, Mr. Mercant, with the talent of premonition. Just like you, by the way."

The sound of the waves seemed to grow louder until it encompassed the entire world and wanted to take him away. "That's...ridiculous!"

"Is it?" was Adams's only reply.

It wasn't necessary for the older gentleman to list his arguments. How many situations had Mercant survived that he shouldn't have? And how often had he sensed where there would be safety for him or that he was being pursued? Just like a few hours ago at the airport.

"You remember many such situations, don't you?" The old man smiled cryptically. "May I ask you another question? How did you feel when you woke up in my house? Like a prisoner? Or like a man who knows he's on the right track?"

Allan clenched his teeth. "That doesn't prove anything."

"It proves that you sensed in advance that you had arrived at a friend's place. That you—with my humble help, if I may say so—are on your way to helping Perry Rhodan. And that's exactly what's close to your heart. And to mine."

"But..." Mercant began, without knowing which objection to

raise.

“We are mutants,” said the old man. “Together, we can change the world.”

“Change the world? The two of us?”

Again, Homer G. Adams laughed. “We are not alone, if that’s what you’re getting at. You and I are only the beginning of something much bigger. Are you up for it?”

Mercant felt a shudder run down his back and legs. “Where do we start?”

His companion looked out at the sea. “We have to find a man by the name of John Marshall.”

Epilogue

Perry Rhodan took a deep breath. He wondered what the future held for him and for humanity. But no matter what was to come, this was likely the most important speech he would ever have the chance to give. This was the moment when the attention of the whole world would be focused on him. He had neither aspired to occupy center stage nor did he feel the desire to do so now. But he was ready to take on the responsibility that was his, before himself and all of humanity.

Since Thora had destroyed the interfering transmitters during her take-off with the weapons of the auxiliary craft per his request, Rhodan could talk to the world freely and openly. He would be heard all across the planet.

Reginald Bull stood ready to begin the broadcast on his signal. By radio, his words and the incredible images he possessed would be sent out. The landed *Stardust*, the sparkling defensive shield, the containers and their contents. Undoubtedly, the news stations of all nations were outdoing each other in an effort to broadcast this message first. A media event like nothing that had ever been seen before.

The astronaut nodded to Bull, who started the transmission. Rhodan could literally feel the pulse of all human civilizations being bundled together here, in this barren place in the midst of a hostile desert.

“People of Earth,” he shouted, “wherever in the world you are hearing and seeing me from right now, please stay tuned. This is about all people and nations. It is about the survival of humanity. It is about your personal futures and those of your children, no matter which nation you belong to!”

By now he was most certainly being seen on countless screens in the bigger cities and even the loneliest villages. He could be heard on the radio in the last deserted mountain hut and the research stations in the ice deserts of the poles. He was being viewed with the *Stardust* in the background, above which the

energy dome sparkled.

Although Rhodan had been looking at this sight for an entire day now, it still seemed unreal to him. Evidence of extraterrestrial technology and alien lives from the vastness of space. If he himself had a hard time believing it in spite of his own experiences, how would it be for everyone who was witnessing this incredible truth for the first time?

"My name is Perry Rhodan. I'm an American astronaut and have returned with the space craft *Stardust* from our recent Moon mission, of which you have undoubtedly heard. My companions are well. The entire crew is on board. The many contradictory news reports that you've heard, first about the failure of the mission, and now about the supposed emergency landing in the Gobi Desert, are fake news from the governments trying to deceive and mislead the public—*you*—every single one of you."

He took a breath and continued, "I landed the *Stardust* in the middle of the Central Asian desert on purpose. It's neither a kidnapping by hostile powers nor a desertion to the People's Republic of China. I have something to say that all people should hear, no matter which country or political system you live in. The American president is probably just as shocked by my decision as the decision-makers of all governments are. All around our landing site, at this very moment, well-equipped Chinese troops are concentrated. They have already bombarded us and tried to destroy us. No, more than that, they are trying to destroy the truth."

As planned, Bull panned the camera around at that precise moment and pointed it towards the troops stationed in the distance, and the tanks and grenade launchers posted menacingly between them, before returning to the *Stardust* and thus to Rhodan.

"You have possibly already seen my first broadcast, made from our craft as we were heading for Earth. And you probably saw the alien Crest da Zoltral, who is safely here with us now. If not, you have at least seen images in the meantime. None of them are fake. They are all accurate. It's the technology of this Arkonide that protects me and my colleagues and that has finally made it possible for you to receive this message. It comes from a distant world that even I know very little about.

"But first, back to the troops besieging us. Despite using their most advanced weapons, they won't be able to defeat us. And the cause for that lies in the events about which I am now going to

inform you. It's the same causes that account for the fact that this broadcast can be received by you anywhere in the world, despite all efforts to suppress the message by various governments and military forces.

"For millennia, humanity has wondered if life exists beyond Earth. The next question is almost always whether that life could even be intelligent, whether one day we might make contact with living beings from other solar systems. Surely, from your childhood you all know old stories or songs about Mrs. Luna and the green Martians. You've seen films and series about aliens, sometimes strange beings with terrifying technology, sometimes only with bumps on the head, pointy ears, or a different skin color.

"During our education, scientists discussed matter-of-factly the types of very basic organic life forms we might encounter on icy comets, asteroids, or the Moon. There was never a mention of intelligent creatures. We were sent on a scientific mission into space to answer questions that could be important for the survival of humans on this planet. But the last thing we expected became truth: on the Moon, we discovered something artificial, something that could not have been man-made. It was a spaceship!"

Again, he paused briefly. The explanation of how they had come to the encounter with Crest seemed necessary to him, and he was certain of the attention of countless listeners right now. A message like this required detailed explanations.

Rhodan closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, looking out onto the vastness of the Gobi Desert and to an incalculable number of people around the globe.

"This space craft was not one of the rockets we have been using drudgingly and at constant risk to our own lives for over half a century as we navigate the space around Earth. It was no satellite, no shuttle, but a real space craft, a starship, built to reach other solar systems across the abyss of infinite space. A metal sphere of five hundred yards in diameter, resting on glass stilts in the middle of a Moon crater!

"We made contact with an alien people there. They are very intelligent beings who mastered space flight millennia ago and are infinitely superior to us in that regard. The Arkonides are peaceful; we can be sure of that. They have been observing us for some time. I must report, however, that after studying many news broadcasts, they weren't very impressed by our intelligence. The problems that

humanity has created for itself on Earth through discord and irrationality cause them to shake their heads. They cannot fathom why we are politically divided, why we threaten each other with war and make the planet on which we live uninhabitable by destroying its resources.

"Crest da Zoltral has welcomed us aboard and has offered us to help us. He has come to the conclusion that in our people, inner greatness and a potential for further development can be found. We only need to find the courage to accept these new challenges and leave deep-seated fears and old hostilities behind. When we confidently unfurl our creativity, we can also create a better world for ourselves. *Our* world! Less poverty and disease, the overcoming of hatred and nationalism, saving our ruined environment—it's possible. *If* we want it and strive for it together and with true conviction!"

Rhodan felt himself being carried away by his words. He had arranged everything meticulously in advance but had barely stuck to this original plan. He spoke as if a low voice were dictating to him, fluently and without pause. He knew what to say and how to convey what was dear to him.

"The Arkonides can open the gateway to the stars for us. The images on this broadcast are showing you some alien metal boxes next to our own rocket, against the backdrop of a salt lake, along with a former American Air Force pilot. Inside the *Stardust* is our friend, Crest da Zoltral. All of that is being threatened by the major powers of this planet. I am being threatened. *You* are being threatened.

"I can imagine you're having doubts about the visions I've awakened in you, and rightly so. But I'm convinced that our species' development and a secure future are possible if we seize this opportunity with courage and confidence. I invite you to participate in this future and to prepare our people's way to the stars.

"Upon landing on Earth, I resigned my military rank and citizenship. Looking down from space on this beautiful blue world, I still felt like a member of this planet but no longer felt like I belonged to a specific nation. Together, with everyone who comes to us in good faith, we will lay the foundation for a united human race. Here, the city of Terrania will emerge, not built on sand but on *your* energy and confidence. It will be independent of national states and alliances, committed only to the goal of paving the way

for our kind into space. We are all people of this planet, no matter our religion, skin color, or origin. Join us in creating this vision! Come to Terrania!”

He was silent. Everything had been said. It was about sowing the seeds, and that’s exactly what he had done.

At the agreed-upon hand signal, the containers of the Arkonide technology opened in the background, and hundreds of robots and other machines poured out. Rhodan himself turned around and looked on as awe filled his heart.

People all over the world could see it too.

Terrania, a new, independent city, was being born.

The future began now.

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

PERRY RHODAN NEO: Volume 1
By Frank Borsch (Episode 1) and Christian Montillon (Episode 2)
Translated by Philip Reuben (Episode 1) and Barbara Wiebking (Episode 2)
Edited by Tess Nanavati
Cover and artwork by toi8

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2011 by Pabel-Moewig Verlag GmbH

Originally published in German as PERRY RHODAN NEO:
Episode 1: Sternenstaub by Frank Borsch
Episode 2: Utopie Terrania by Christian Montillon
English translation rights arranged with Perry Rhodan KG, Rastatt
"Perry Rhodan" is a registered trademark of Perry Rhodan KG.
Learn more about Perry Rhodan at https://www.perry-rhodan.de.
All rights reserved.

Artwork rights arranged through Hayakawa Publishing Corporation
English Translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Pulp is an imprint of J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club

President & Publisher: Samuel Pinansky
J-Novel Pulp Line Manager: J. Collis
Managing Translator: Kristi Fernandez
Managing Editor: Jan Mitsuko Cash
QA Manager: Hannah N. Carter
Marketing Manager: Stephanie Hii

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: June 2021